

“What sort of Church do we want to be...need to be....should be?”

The future of the Diocese of Melbourne in the next twenty years

Peter Corney.

This address is about the future. They say that in relation to the future there are three kinds of people: Those who let it happen, those who make it happen and those who wonder what happened!

It is tempting to begin with structural and institutional issues and there are plenty of them! The future shape and size of parishes, the question of mergers and rationalization, the cost of maintaining the traditional suburban parish model with shrinking and aging congregations, our unwieldy synodical structure, our need to develop new models of missional congregations, church planting and the limitations of parish boundaries, the better use of our property assets, etc., and I will return to some of these issues. But I want to start somewhere more fundamental with what I believe is the big theological issue before us.

A choice has been constructed for us by a section of the Diocese of a future led in one of only two directions; the direction of a broad liberal Church or that of a caricature of a narrow constricted Church. There is also abroad a number of misleading ideas like the notion that a broad liberal Church is normative Anglicanism and that this will produce a Church more engaged with its society. The alternative to this that is painted is a caricature of a narrow conservative Church that will be disengaged. I want to challenge this construction and move the focus of our choice to a different and more helpful place.

The idea that a broad liberal Church is the Anglican norm just doesn't fit the facts. Any objective survey shows that in reality it occupies only a part of our very diverse history. When it has prevailed it has proved to be very uncreative. In the late 18th and early 19th C when it had a run its followers were called “Latitudinarians”. As the name suggests they wanted to be characterized by breadth not narrowness, moderation not emotionalism. They were partly a reaction to the strong theological debates of the Puritan era and, as they perceived it, the emotionalism of the dissenters and early Methodists of their own times. As one Latitudinarian Bishop famously said “enthusiasm is a horrid thing.” They were also strongly influenced by the rationalism of “the age of reason” and the developing natural sciences.

Unfortunately the condition they produced in the English Church could be described, to use a modern phrase, as “not dead but deeply unconscious!” As one writer of the time put it “a sacred dullness” fell upon the Church, “sleep crept from pew to pew”.⁽¹⁾ Sermons became dull, lifeless lectures that bored the hearers into a spiritual as well as a physical torpor. This is the world of the novels of Jane Austin, George Eliot and Anthony Trollope. The Countess in Eliot's “Scenes of a clerical life” on one occasion says with some feeling of her Vicars sermons that “It's the cold in the pulpit that affects me not the cold in the pew!” That's a serious comment given the damp unheated churches of 18th and early 19thC England. Sermons were full of dull moralisms but without any social or cultural critique of the moneyed classes or the low morality of the Restoration court. As a

result an incipient Pelagianism crept into the Church. This atmosphere and the avoidance of emotion contributed to the climate of spiritual and emotional hunger that helped prepare the way for the Evangelical revival of the late 18th and 19thC.

The idea that a broad liberal Church leads to a greater engagement with society just doesn't fit the facts. It was the Puritans with their radical political critique and desire for a true "commonwealth" who engaged with the big socio/political questions. It was the Dissenters, Methodists and Evangelicals who tackled the issues of justice and fairness for the poor and working classes and who formed the basis for the beginnings of organized labor. (The first leader of the British Labor Party was an evangelical Christian, James Keir Hardie.) It required conviction and courage not blandness to challenge the establishment in the highly structured society of that time. It is also worth noting that along with their socio/political engagement both the Puritans, the Methodists and the Evangelicals recovered a passion for the preaching of grace and vital worship. So many of the hymns we love came from this period. **They brought together the three great emphases that we desperately need today – passionate worship, passionate evangelism and a passion for justice.**

Some Evangelicals lost this three fold emphasis for a time but in the 1970's it was recovered through the influence of the Lausanne Movement and the leadership of John Stott. But there is always a danger that we can narrow moral issues down to only the personal and individual level and fail to see the radical implications of structural and corporate evil. This happens when the Gospel is disconnected from its New Testament Kingdom framework and so the implications for the whole of culture. Evangelicals need to keep in mind the great record of their forebears and their passion for the gospel in word and deed.

Let me give just one more example. The Anglo Catholic movement in the 19th C. was born out of a renewed vision of the glory and holiness of God. It expressed that in a revival of dignified and awe filled worship, beautiful hymns, evangelism and a passion for working with the poor. While strongly influenced by the Romantic movement of the time they nevertheless produced a holistic theology. In 1923 a noted Anglo Catholic Bishop, Frank Weston said: "You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the Tabernacle if you do not pity Jesus in the slums." Father Tucker's work during the great depression and the development of The Brotherhood of St. Lawrence in Melbourne is a direct outcome of this emphasis. The movement developed and staffed schools, hospitals, and missional orders to work among the poor and marginalized. Sadly as the movement gradually departed from the classical orthodoxy of their founders and embraced a liberal theological agenda the passion waned till now the movement and its ministries are but a shadow of the past. Passion leaks, if the original vision of God fades it will not be renewed!

These passions do not arise from a bland liberalism they arise from the recovery of a "**Vital orthodoxy**", classical Christian faith, historic orthodoxy, the great tradition, the faith of the creeds, the faith grounded in the Word of God and enlivened by the Holy Spirit. A community enlivened by the Holy Spirit who holds this faith will have a much

greater chance of being captured by the Biblical vision of God. It is that vision that will drive us to passionate worship, passionate evangelism, and a passionate concern for social justice. The key is the vision of the Holy God not a God reduced to fit the prevailing plausibility structure and moral framework of contemporary Australian life. In the history of our Church the passion for worship, evangelism and justice has always arisen from a recovery of this vision. Theological liberalism slowly sucks out the oxygen of classical belief that produces passionate faith.

So we must reject this false choice that has been constructed for us and the misleading ideas on which it is based, that is our first and key decision.

*[By Passionate Worship, Passionate Evangelism, and a Passion for Social Justice I mean the following: “**Passionate Worship**” is where peoples experience and vision of the Holy God brings forth a profound desire to worship with awe and love and deep feeling and where people are able to express these desires and feelings in the idiom of their own culture. “**Passionate Evangelism**” is where people have a sense of urgency and concern to share their faith because they realize that the Holy Love of God can only be approached and experienced by sinful people through Christ the mediator of grace. “**A Passion for Social Justice**” is where the vision of the just and Holy God drives people to live and act justly like God and to work to conform their societies values to the character of God.]*

Let me turn now to other matters.

First a statistical snapshot:

1981 235 parishes
2006 216
In 25 yrs a loss of 19.

In the last 5 yrs -13 amalgamations and 7 closures, one new parish.

Estimated total attendance on an average Sunday:

1981 50,000
2006 21,000
In 25 yrs a loss of 29,000.
From 1991 to 1998 we lost 22,000 Christmas communicants
From 2001 to 2005 “ 5,000 “ “

Our current age profile: 40% are over 60 yrs, 11% are under 30 yrs.

Currently we have 275 “worshiping congregations”, if you remove the attendance figures of the 10 largest congregations you get an average attendance of approximately 62 per w/congregation.

Currently 6% of active clergy are under 35 yrs, 59% are over 50 yrs.
(Figures supplied by Diocesan Registry and NCLS data.2001)

There are four ways of looking at where we are as a Church at the moment:

- (1) We are an institution /organization in serious decline and so we need renewal, revival, reform, radical transformation. Internally our core motivation is low and our current structures are proving ineffective for our core mission.
- (2) We are an institution /organization in a social and cultural environment that is hostile to our core meaning and purpose, to our world view, our values, indeed to the very way we organize, meet and express ourselves. So we need to consolidate, and sit it out till the environment changes. Survive till the Post Christian, Post Modern climate changes!
- (3) Nostalgia – let’s hang on to or remake the past.
- (4) Denial – never underestimate the power of denial!

My own position is that the only creative way forward is to start with the first view – renewal, reform, radical transformation. So the rest of my ideas proceed from that basis.

A metaphor: Pioneers → Settlers → Establishment → Rural decline → New Pioneers

Let’s think of the Church in terms of rural Australia: First we have the “Pioneer phase”, it’s rough, tough and basic, then the “Settler” phase, the homes are built the farms established, then the “Establishment” phase. In the “establishment” phase there is now a small town, a shire office, schools, banks, some small businesses, etc... Then comes rural decline - the world changes, the economy changes, technology changes, the markets for rural products change, etc... Now there are fewer jobs for young people, the population begins to fall, the banks close, the Doctor leaves, the kids go to Melbourne, etc.... The decline cannot be ignored it’s a painful reality. After a difficult period people begin to adjust and then in some rural areas they begin to reinvent! They enter a “New Pioneer” phase.

They consolidate farms, go for economies of scale, they plant new crops, bring in new breeds, some specialize in super fine wool and value added production techniques, spouses take second jobs off the farm, the way farms are staffed and run changes, the shire attracts a new technology business with low rates and other incentives, they start their own rural bank with some other towns, they begin a tourism campaign, B& B’s spring up and the old store becomes a coffee shop! Etc, etc... Renewal begins!

Like rural Australia we must enter the “New Pioneer” phase or continue the slow painful decline. Well what will that look like for us in concrete terms?

First, we must recognize that the Church militant only lives by continuing to reproduce its self in living people with a living faith. Institutions, structures and buildings are not unimportant but they can survive while the Church dies.

The primary places where we reproduce, nurture and disciple people with living faith are the family and the local congregation. Sector ministries are important, Christian schools are important, particularly as places of interface and mission with parts of society that the local congregation does not normally reach, but the primary places of reproducing and nurturing faith are the family and the local congregation.

The local congregation and the Christian family are the fundamental expression of Christian community. The local congregation is vital as a primary support for the Christian family. The local congregation is also a base from which we initiate outreach and service to the wider community. It is also the base that provides the resources of people and money for non parochial ministries. It is a key place where future leadership is nurtured and ministry gifts identified. If we have strong healthy growing congregations we will have a strong, healthy and growing Church. **So strategically this is where we need to focus, where the “new pioneering” needs to be concentrated.**

The Diocesan framework has a variety of roles but its priority role must be to revitalize parish ministry. It can no longer be “business as usual” we have to move to strategic action mode. If we want a different future we have to create it.

There are at least 10 key areas relating to the local congregation that we must address:

- (1) *The leadership/ministry area.* We need to recruit **leader**/pastors not pastor/maintainer’s. We need people who can innovate and initiate, who can regenerate communities, entrepreneurs. Men and women with gifts and abilities in communication, recruiting and motivating others, building teams and community, the ability to teach, persuade and build vision – in a word, leaders! We no longer have the luxury of accepting well intentioned sincere pious people who think they have a call to pastoral ministry but are not strong in leadership gifts. We can not continue a “Vicar of Dibly syndrome” unless we want to be trivialized as a charming anachronism or an historical theme park. Remember they are laughing at us not with us! We also need to move the general recruiting age to a younger profile. Movements are renewed by the young not the middle aged! In terms of recruitment, training and placement strategy we need to have parallel tracks to the conventional one that are more flexible. The traditional track of 4years study and 4years of curacy can not be the only model E.g.: We need apprenticeship models and recognition of prior learning. We need approaches that allow growing and healthy congregations with good models of ministry to have a larger role and authority in the process. We need to encourage intern schemes, “Gap” programs and participation in multiple staff teams as part of training.
- (2) *New models of ministry/congregations.* We need to think outside the traditional Anglican box. The conventional model of the cross generational family village Church needs to be expanded and in some cases abandoned. **The future is in a variety of models of different styles and sizes, large and small.** In some cases

mergers and consolidations will be appropriate. Preferably strategy should dictate these rather than economic necessity. There is significant evidence that mergers out of economic necessity in fact diminish numbers rather than enhance them. Particularly if the leadership that oversaw the decline remains or the new leadership is not strong. The small suburban congregation of 60- 80 with a vicar and the usual suite of buildings and an aging membership moving on to fixed incomes has a very limited future economically.

- (3) *Church planting* must be encouraged in established areas as well as new housing developments and new experimental alternative missional congregations encouraged to reach into the diverse “urban tribes” of Melbourne. The rules on parish boundaries will have to be relaxed.
- (4) We need to take more initiative to encourage *the planting of new settler / ethnic congregations* but in association with English speaking ones so there is some integration and second generation involvement assured. The staff need to be integrated with the established congregation. There is a spiritual vitality and energy in many of these new immigrant Christian communities that we need.
- (5) *Redeveloping, redeploying or realizing the assets* of existing property to promote and fund new initiatives. We are asset rich but cash poor. But this needs to be done against a master plan.
- (6) *Develop a master plan* for each region in relation to questions of property, new missional initiatives, new church planting and congregational revitalizations. This plan would determine what properties we sell, keep, redevelop, what congregations we merge etc. E.g.: Each university should have an excellent student focused congregation in its student catchment area staffed appropriately.
- (7) *Youth and student ministry* must become a major priority. This is where the future leadership will be drawn from. E.g.: The diocese should allocate funding for training youth and student workers as well as ordained clergy.
- (8) *Congregations must become focused outward on missional outreach, in word and deed.*
- (9) *The development of a strong sense of community.* As community breaks down further in Australian society this will become enormously attractive.
- (10) *The central leadership and administration must develop a permission giving culture* and not be drawn into a negative compliance and control syndrome. The current social climate of over protection, litigiousness and fear of risk reinforces the tendency to compliance and control. This must be resisted! We need diocesan leaders who are relaxed and very flexible and willing to take risks with new models and approaches. The leadership needs to be very focused on our core values and mission but flexible at the edges, willing to develop new alternative parallel programs

alongside old ones. The institution must create a structural framework that allows the social movement of people with enthusiastic living faith to revive. Only rewarding creativity and growth, openness to new models, flexibility, and relaxing the institutional rules and attitudes will do that.

In the process of tackling these strategic structural issues we must remember that structural renewal does not always produce spiritual renewal. The two must go hand in hand.

Second, there are a series of “myths” we must challenge if we are to go forward.

- (1) **The denominational franchise myth** – all Anglican congregations must look alike. In a “Mosaic culture” contextualizing is a key, this will produce variety.
- (2) **The myth that the cross generational family village church is the only model.** It will continue to be a valid model but only one among a variety of ways of organizing Church.
- (3) **The myth that people under 45 are denominationally loyal.** Denominational tags are increasingly irrelevant to contemporary people and of little influence in their decisions about attendance of a congregation. That will be decided by the variety of programs offered, the quality of worship and teaching, and whether there is a healthy children’s and youth ministry.
- (4) **The myth that local communities are residentially stable.** At least 17% of Australians move every year and 40% every 5years. This means that Christian communities have to be constantly rebuilt. Welcoming systems, the constant development of voluntary leaders and clergy being willing to hang in for the long haul are all vital.
- (5) **The myth that the pastoral maintenance model of ministry grows churches.** This model has in fact presided over decline. In a high change culture leadership and creative initiative are crucial.
- (6) **The myth that new churches are only planted in new housing areas.** New Congregations must be replanted in established areas as well as new ones
- (7) **The myth that in a mass media urban culture personal faith is still caught by association or socialization.** In fact the power of the mass media is so great that it socializes young people out of faith. Young people, including the children of Christian families, need to be brought to a personal decision and a “conversion experience” if their faith is to survive in this culture.
- (8) **The quality vs. quantity myth.** The idea that numbers don’t matter its quality not quantity that counts. This is a false dichotomy – both matter! Ministry to the few means that the majority are left out. This can be an irresponsible position and

an excuse for failure.

- (9) **The myth of the charming amateur.** The notion that the bumbling parson who runs a somewhat chaotic service and organization is charming, authentic and attractive and anything else is merely slick and superficial. If attendance is a any measure of this myth then clearly the majority of punters have voted with their feet. Frankly we can do without the Rowan Atkinson image!

Effective new paradigm churches have challenged all these myths.

Third, we need to become a church that lives creatively rather than defensively with the following tensions:

- (1) ***Between denominational distinctives and contextual relevance.*** This is a common tension for all denominations today. But the overriding priority must always be the mission imperative not the preservation of denominational culture. If there is a choice to be made the mission imperative must take priority. Sometimes that may mean celebrating or reviving a tradition. Sometimes it will mean radically reshaping a tradition, at other times it may mean abandoning it altogether. The mosaic culture demands variety not a bland uniformity of Churches and so the expression of the heritage will vary from place to place. It is naïve to think we can dismiss our denominational history and traditions but they must always be subject to the principle of making effective the mission imperative.
- (2) ***Between our distinctive Christian values and contemporary Australian culture.*** There is an ever present pressure that can seduce us into cultural conformity, it must be resisted. (E.g.: The “Prosperity Gospel” or novel alternatives to the Christian understanding of the identity of the family and the divine intention for human sexuality, etc.) Unless we are a community of distinctive values, lifestyle and belief we have nothing to offer our culture. A community without boundaries is destined to disappear. As Thomas Oden has written of the circle of faith “*A center without a circumference is just a dot, nothing more ...to eliminate the boundary is to eliminate the circle itself.*”(2) The future of the Christian community lies in our obedience to two imperatives - distinctiveness and mission. We must live and work in the creative tension between the two commands – “Be holy for I am holy” and “Go and make disciples.” Without boundaries we are destined to disappear, but equally if we fail to focus beyond our boundaries we will disappear.

- (3) ***Between the prophetic role in politics and the active role.*** Over the next few years there are a number of critical socio/political issues that face us as a nation. The Christian faith has a unique and important contribution to make to each of them. They are: Industrial relations and extreme views on privatization.
: The environment, global warming, water, energy, etc.
: Multiculturalism, immigration, refugees, religious Fundamentalism.
: The future of Indigenous Australians.

Our theology of creation, incarnation, relationships, reconciliation, justice, compassion, community and unity in Christ speak powerfully to each of these issues. The question we face is will we just take a so called “prophetic stance” and only speak out or will we also become more practically engaged in the political process? Given that the interface between politics and religion is very much alive again in Australia it may be hard to avoid this question.

Finally let me close with the biggest challenge of all, which if we fail, all the above becomes irrelevant.

The need to be a church that can retell the Gospel story so that it connects and engages with the people of our contemporary culture.

A parable – “The shattered story”

Imagine a 14th C. Church which has a series of beautiful stained glass windows that tell the Biblical story of creation, fall, and redemption. They begin on the south side with a window nearest the chancel arch that depicts Adam and Eve as the crown of God’s creation, and then the fall and their ejection from the garden. As we proceed along the south wall the windows continue the story. There is the flood, the Ark and the rainbow of promise. Then we see the call of Abraham, we move on to King David and then to the great prophet Isaiah. When we turn to the north side wall we begin with John the Baptist and Christ coming to be baptized, then there is the healing of the blind man and the Sermon on the Mount. As we approach the chancel arch on the north side we come to the last supper and the betrayal window. As we walk up through the chancel into the sanctuary there on the east wall above the Holy table is the powerful crucifixion window with its ruby red and almost blue black glass with touches of gold. Then our eyes are taken upward by a mosaic of the resurrection and ascension to the apex of the arch to rest finally on the great east window of three intersecting circles. Each circle containing a symbol, one for God the Father, one for God the Son and one for God the Holy Spirit. The light shines through the glass in brilliant colors of transcendent beauty.

The whole is a magnificent artistic depiction of the Judeo-Christian view of history and reality, the great story of creation, fall and redemption.

But a catastrophe is about to overtake this place. There is a great earthquake and the building is almost completely destroyed. Such is the magnitude of the shocks that every window is shattered, even the mosaic on the east wall is shaken free and destroyed.

Later if you were to approach the building, although now a ruin, its shape is still discernable, but the windows and mosaic are broken and scattered in a thousand fragments on the stone floor of the remains of the building.

Imagine visiting the building some years later and finding a child sitting on the flagstone floor. She has never known the building as it was. She is playing with the fragments of mosaic and stained glass. As you watch she moves them into little random patterns of color and shape, lost in her game. As you observe this scene you wonder how you could explain to her what all these fragments really mean, what they once represented.

This child represents the people of post modernity playing in the wreckage of western culture.

To quote Jean Baudrillard on the deconstruction of all meaning and absolutes “*..all that are left are pieces. All that remains to be done is to play with the pieces. Playing with the pieces - that is post modernism.*” (3.)

Our task now is for us to so engage with God and His Word that that we will be empowered afresh by the Spirit - empowered to retell The Story so powerfully and meaningfully that it engages and makes sense to this generation and delivers them from their world of fragmented meaning into the love and grace of Christ the Lord of all.

(1) “Charles Simeon Preacher Extraordinary” Grove LS18 1979 p5. (2) Thomas Oden “TheRebirth of Orthodoxy” Harper Collins 2003, p131. (3) D.Groothuis “Truth decay” IVP 2000 p169.

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