

The 79th Synod kicked off, as it always does, with the President's address. This year instead of choosing to focus on a specific topic or issue of Synod the Archbishop spoke on a new way of conducting Synod, which was the use of what is called "Open Spaces". But before detailing just what Open Spaces are and how it was run, it is important to understand the logic behind the decision to implement this process.

The Archbishop began by reminding us all what the term Synod means. It comes from the Greek terms *syn* which means "together" as in synthesis, and *hodos* which means "road, route, or way" and as such the term was defined as meaning "discerning together a way forward."

In his address the Archbishop reminded us of the fact that by and large, the outcomes of Synod are dependent upon "the attitudes with which one comes to synod, on the perspective one adopts, on one's frame of mind and sense of expectation and anticipation." Furthermore he reflected on the fact that over the years "people naming the truth have helped the church to face its responsibilities."

Bearing this in mind, the Archbishop proceeded to talk about the way in which synod has traditionally been run, which was under the Westminster system. This method of administering the meeting, while officious and efficient in some ways, can lend itself towards confusing and marginalising the majority while enabling a vocal minority - my words, not his. In short those that understand the rules - play the game, and can unfortunately end up limiting full discourse or exploration of very important matters in our church communities. It was for this reason that a new method of engaging clergy and laity was sought out, and why this year we began the business of Synod with an Open Spaces session.

Within his address the Archbishop stated that the goal of the Open Spaces experiment was for representatives to speak about their "shared passion" so that they could "actively claim" their "own God-given gifts and capacity to do something about it." But this wasn't intended to sit and remain at the individual level - the broader intent was for people to raise their concerns and then to find and establish a guiding coalition within the broader synod to share the concern with and together take proactive steps to address a problem or take advantage of an opportunity.

To illustrate this, the Archbishop spoke about an early example of how "Open Spaces" could work by citing the gospel story of feeding the masses - the disciples came to Christ saying, "we need to feed these people. What will we give them?" and Christ responded with, "Don't ask me. Figure it out." Paraphrasing of course. They found some bread and fish. Christ blessed what they had. They fed the 4000 and had heaps of leftovers. Using this gospel story to highlight the possibility the Archbishop challenged the body of synod to, "Take responsibility. Use what you have to hand. Act together with those who share your concern. You'll be amazed at the results."

I'd like to close the summary of the President's address with one final quote regarding Anglican tradition, open dialogues and rationality:

This ongoing process of dialogue and shared exploration at many different levels is close to the heart of Anglicanism. Anglicans are deeply devoted to the scriptures because we believe that, through many and various ways, God has given them to us and they reveal God to us. But the scriptures need to be approached with care and understood properly. We believe that God has also created human beings with the capacity to reason. Richard Hooker, probably the greatest Anglican theologian of all time, said that reason is not simply the ability to draw logical conclusions. It's much more than that. It's the God-given capacity to discern, to apprehend divine wisdom in the scriptures, in creation and in society.

Ok - so we have covered off on the fact that this synod, or at least a large proportion of it, was going to be run differently to past synods. But *how would it be different?* Well, as opposed to the traditional Westminster motion - debate - amendment - vote - debate - committee - vote - debate - final vote, we were going to move into self-organising groups around a chosen topic and discuss the issue with (ideally) respect underpinned by a desire to listen and work together. You know, small group stuff - Eek!

The whole process was kicked off with two facilitators outlining the rules of engagement and roles that each of us would play. They said that some of us will be “butterflies” and float between rooms and topics. That some would be “bees” and would act as provocateurs and spur the group on in conversation. They also told us that it was important for all to engage when felt driven to do so and also to possibly retreat to the “billabongs” as required - have a cup of tea, go for a walk, etc. as required when the conversation gets to be overwhelming. Participation was to be self-determined.

To determine the topics of conversation over the three hour and twenty minute sessions the Archbishop began with a single question, which was: “What is God calling us to be and to do, at this time?” Through this question we were asked to “tease... out in the light of what concerns us at the moment in our church and society” in order to raise a topic for discussion amongst the other representatives.

As prior notice had been given to representatives there were many ideas and topics for discussion presented once the process kicked off, to be exact there were 17 possible conversations to join in the first session. 20 in the second and 17 in the third. No shortage of options! And not only were they great in quantity, but they were also great in variety. From theological discussion of biblical authority to transactional questions of improving diocesan responses to major projects.

The conversations that ensued were lively and engaging and allowed for a whole host of topics and ideas to be discussed and explored as a group, within a safe and respectful manner. Time will tell how successful the approach to synod was, and I can't say to you right now hand-on-heart that because of our Open Space dialogue our diocese has grown in number or financial stature, but I can say that we have openly explored new topics and ideas as a group which I pray can only help to bring us closer together and therefore stronger.

The final outcomes of the Open Spaces dialogues have been captured in two ways:

1. A collection of notes will be put together and posted online for anyone to access.

2. People who were moved through the conversations to take action were asked to publicly state their area of interest and then ask the group if anyone would be interested in working with them to further explore the topic. If you're interested in the final 10 or so topics that were being carried forth for further consideration and action please speak to me after the service.

The Open Spaces sessions finished Saturday afternoon. After this time we were able to get into the more routine business of Synod. In all there were 18 motions raised. Within those 18 were the more formal requests for thanks and recognition as well as diocesan ministry reports, including the Auditor's report and budget. Aside from the more procedural motions there were a number of social issues that arose as well, as has been consistent during my tenure at Synod. These include issues related to the response on child sexual abuse, sexual identity and gender issues, as well as other societal issues.

Motions of note were:

5. Domestic and Family Violence

- Recognised the social, emotional and spiritual cost of domestic and family violence on the Anglican community
- Affirms the Diocesan commitment to gender equality, recognising that this is the most significant driver of domestic and family violence, and
- Requests the establishment of a Diocesan Family Violence working group be established to oversee policy development, training and education on prevention, intervention and response.

6. Affirming Anglican Unity in Diversity

- Affirms with thanksgiving the "rich and dynamic diversity of expression in Anglican prayer, theology and ethical living."
- Asked that we be mindful of those elements within the church community that could create a divide amongst us and thereby place our dynamism at risk.
- Requested formal recognition and communication of this position be communicated more broadly.

7. Affirming Anglican Schools Support of Gender Diverse Students

- Affirm the welcoming role Anglican schools play to all people.
- Commended the work being undertaken currently.
- Encouraged Anglican schools to recognise the "Australian Standards of Care and Treatment Guidelines for trans and gender diverse children and adolescents."

9. Nicene Creed

- Asked for the establishment of a committee to investigate the possible cessation of saying the filioque clause in the Nicene Creed in worship in the diocese, to liaise with the general synod on the matter and to report back to Synod in 2020.
- Rationale: the filioque clause relates to the nature of the Holy Spirit as coming from the father *and the son*. This same issue was the major contributor to the schism between east and west in 1054. Recent discussion have recommended the removal of the clause from the western creed, including Anglican-Orthodox dialogues at the Lambeth Conference.

13. Conversion Therapy

- Acknowledged that we were all made in the image of God.

- Acknowledged the damage caused by conversion therapy and sexual orientation change efforts.
- Asked that the practice not be advocated for.
- Asked that the synod call upon the Australian government to protect youth and families by banning the therapy and asking for stricter regulations for counsellors in this area.

15. Publication of the book *Marriage, Same-sex Marriage and the Anglican Church of Australia*

- Notes that the previous resolution has been completed with the publication of this book.
- Notes that the book is available as a free download online.
- Encourages all members of the church to engage closely with the essays in the book, which seek to inform and facilitate a respectful conversation in our church about marriage, same-sex marriage and the blessings of same-sex unions.
- Discussion on the motion the following points were highlighted:
 - That the essay is comprised of equal *for* and *against* positions on each of the topics in an effort to be balanced.
 - None of the essays were written by anyone from the LGBTI community from within our Diocese.
- Details of where you can download the book will be posted on the parish's Facebook page.

The majority of discussion during the Lay Synod on Sunday morning related to two common and recurrent themes:

- How can we better support regional and remote ministry financially and spiritually?
- How can we better capitalise upon increasing church membership through our Anglican schools?

In relation to the second issue there was some mention of looking to current practices within our Catholic counterparts, where they are seen as doing a better job of providing theological education and support to high school students. No formal actions were raised or taken forward from these conversations.

In summary this year's synod looked to use contemporary solutions to largely contemporary problems, which included even those things that one would traditionally think should be contained only in the past, but are still relevant to us today. I guess all things have to be as we are a part of a living tradition that dates back to before the Great Schism and begins with the Apostles as a member of the body of Christ. We should never forget that God is the God of yesterday, today and tomorrow - forever and ever, world without end. It is our job to communicate this fact freely and with great love so that our own passion and confidence in the word can flourish in an often confrontational and indifferent world - whether through formal procedural methods or through more organic and contemporary means. Ultimately it doesn't matter - God will be there on the journey with us regardless of the medium. It's just up to us to listen.