



53rd Synod of the Diocese of Sydney
Presidential Address
15 September 2025

I believe in conversion!

I believe in conversion because the first recorded words of Jesus' public ministry are words that call on his hearers to be converted.

Mark records:

"... Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, saying , "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel." (Mark 1:14)

For the first time in Mark's narrative Jesus speaks. 'Repent and believe the gospel.'

'Gospel' was not a religious word. It was an ordinary word for good news, but not for ordinary news. It was a word for extraordinary news, news of glad tidings or momentous occasions; news of kings being born or being crowned or being victorious. Or being present. 'The Kingdom of God is at hand.' Because Jesus was at hand, the long-awaited time is fulfilled. The King is here. Good news.

World-changing, life-transforming, epoch-shaping news. Gospel. Something has happened that will change your life forever.

What God has done for us – Jesus died on the cross for the forgiveness of our sin and he rose again in victory to give us new life that lasts forever. The Lord gave his life as Saviour, our Saviour rose as Lord of life, and Judge of all. He has dealt with our sin, and now risen from the dead, ascended on high, he has sent the Spirit who transforms our lives.

The Christian emotion is joy, because we have good news to celebrate, not good advice to put into practice. The loneliness of self-centeredness, the delusion of self-glorification, the burden of self-justification – are gone. The goading of envy, the captivity of anxiety, the encroachment of meaninglessness – they're despatched. We're free from our own wretched obsession with ourselves. Religion is advice – here's how you can get things into shape. But gospel is good news. Here's what God has done for you – repent and believe the gospel!

Repent and believe – turn and trust.

They are two sides of the one coin. Together repentance and faith are what we usually call conversion. They are the human response to what God has done in the gospel of his Son. But they are also God's work *in* us, in response to God's work *for* us.

Faith is trust, and Christian faith is trust in Jesus. Jesus is presented to us in his gospel – so faith in Jesus is the same as faith in his gospel. He is the object of our faith, and we come to know him in his gospel.

"If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Romans 10:9), says the apostle Paul.

Not merely intellectual assent to certain propositions, but a clinging to Christ with heart and mind and will, a surrender and embrace of all that he is.

Faith is not a work of humans but of God, uniting people to Christ by Word and Spirit. 'For by grace you have been saved, through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast' (Ephesians 2:8-9). The grace that saves precedes the faith that clings to Christ. Calvin said, 'faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit'.

Repentance is that decisive and ongoing 'about face', as we daily turn from sin and turn to the Lord. "They tell how you turned from idols to serve the living and true God" Paul says of the Thessalonians (1 Thess 1:9-10).

Like the faith that saves, repentance too is the work of God. God commands all people everywhere to repent, Paul tells the Athenians (Acts 17:30-31), but God also *grants* repentance, as the Jerusalem elders acknowledge when they learn of the conversion of Cornelius, 'God has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life' (Acts 11:18).

Conversion is God's work - to bring forth in people the response that the gospel demands. Conversion is God's work – suddenly, like Saul on the road to Damascus; gradually, like Timothy at his grandmother's knee; alongside a river, where God opened Lydia's heart; in a crisis as when God saved the Philippian gaoler. We preach not ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord – and as we do, God gives new birth and brings forth faith and repentance by his Word and Spirit, in accordance with his sovereign and perfect will, making those who were dead in sin alive in Christ.

I believe in conversion because I was converted!

Next January it will be forty years since, by God's grace he opened my eyes to see the sin in my own heart and the grace that flows from the Cross of Christ. A death of limitless power, a sacrifice of matchless beauty to satisfy a just wrath, to atone immovable and infinite sin, to overwhelm and heal a deep and deadly corruption. Reading the Gospel alone in my room, not because I was on a search for God, but because God was on a search for me. Reading the gospel because I had promised the friend who gave it to me, that I would do so, not knowing that the friend who gave it to me, was praying that I would read it and be converted. Not knowing that my Christian grandmother had prayed, I guess, for my conversion all my life until the end of hers. Not knowing, despite having been told, that another friend who had been converted by the Lord when we were fourteen, had started to pray for the conversion of his Buddhist friend, and hadn't stopped. Not only that, but he had also enlisted his friends to pray for me as well. And they did, and the Lord heard their prayers. Praise God.

And I believe in conversion because Sydney needs to be converted.

The challenges facing Sydney are myriad - cost of living, the housing crisis, domestic violence, the epidemic of youth anxiety and depression, social isolation, polarisation and discontent spilling onto the streets. Complex problems, not easily solved, enormous human suffering. We are impacted along with everyone else, but often, too churches picking up the pieces, offering comfort and hope. Nevertheless, we say what Sydney needs most is Christ!

The National Church Life Survey reported in May that in Protestant, Pentecostal and Roman Catholic churches across Australia, average weekly attendance in 2024 was about 1.3 million Australians or about 5% of the 27 million population of Australia.

Thirty-eight per cent of all church attending Australians live in NSW and the ACT, the largest proportion of any State or Territory. In raw numbers that's about 495K people in NSW and ACT attending church each week. The average weekly attendance at Sydney Anglican churches is just over 50K including children based on 2024 reporting, which means nearly one in ten church goers in NSW and ACT are attending Sydney Anglican Churches.

But the population of the diocese, which is roughly Greater Sydney and the Illawarra was about 5.5 million at the 2021 census. That means that more than 5 million people in the Diocese of Sydney were not attending any church. About ten percent of Australia's population profess other religious faiths, but in 2021, thirty-nine per cent described themselves as having no religion at all.

By God's grace, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ landed in Australia when the Reverend Richard Johnson disembarked with the First Fleet at Botany Bay. He did not want to come to Sydney. He wrote:

I implored divine direction what to do in an affair of so weighty moment...On the one hand, the idea of leaving my parents, relations, friends...the dangers of the sea, the descriptions of the people I was going with, the place to which we were going, to the very ends of the earth...these and such like ideas so impressed my mind with fear and terror that I sometimes was greatly inclined ...to decline the offer...

But then, on the other hand, when I considered the propriety, nay the necessity of some person going out in this capacity...the hopes and prospects of being rendered useful in the reformation of those poor and abandoned people; the power and promises of God to protect me in any place or situation ...these considerations overbalanced and removed all my scruples and fears, and induced me to give my free consent to enter upon the hazardous expedition.

Dear friends, can we not, and should we not, recover the trust of Richard Johnson in the power and promises of God, and be moved by the plight of those millions around us who are without the knowledge of God, under his just judgement and facing eternity separated from Christ and everything good? Must we not be moved by the sacrifice of our Saviour for the salvation of the lost to commit and commend ourselves again into the service of God so that Jesus is honoured in our midst as men and women, young and old, first nations people and those from every nation under heaven now resident in our midst, turn to Christ in repentance and faith. He died that we may live, may we not live so that others may know eternal life through faith in Jesus?

Must we not commit ourselves to the conversion of Sydney? Is Jesus not worthy? Are our friends and family not needy? Are we not those who live not for ourselves, but for him who died for sin and was raised again (2 Corinthians 5:15)?

A Special Five-Year Focus

This Synod is being asked by Standing Committee to commit itself to a special focus on attendance, mission and ministry among young people and children over the next five years.

Last year the Synod received the Attendance Patterns report which showed among other things that in the decade from 2013-2023 total Sydney Anglican adult attendance declined by 7% (or 14% relative to population growth over the same period). Two thirds of our church centres experienced some decline, and only one third experienced growth over that period. In addition, the number of newcomers attending church, as measured by the National Church

Life Survey was found to have declined from 12.4% in 2001 to 5.4% in 2021. Newcomers includes new believers, and not-yet believers who may be exploring Christian faith, so people being saved is closely aligned with the number of newcomers. This means that some of the growth recorded by some churches was mostly because of transfer rather than conversion.

In response to these findings the Synod called for confession and humble repentance where we have fallen short in not giving sufficient priority, attention and resources to seeing the lost saved by Jesus throughout the Diocese of Sydney. This was an appropriate response to a complex problem which had external as well as internal dimensions – social, cultural, denominational and congregational. Last year's Synod called on every part of the Sydney Anglican fellowship – the Standing Committee, episcopal team, Regional Councils, Mission Area Leaders, Senior Ministers, lay and ordained local church ministers, training colleges and diocesan organisations - to prayerfully reflect on the report, and decide on appropriate responses, at every level.

I have been deeply encouraged in the last twelve months at the ways in which people have sought to respond to the call of last year's Synod. In May, I invited our fellowship to join together under the banner 'Before the Throne' - a day of prayer for the spread of the gospel across our diocese. A couple of hundred people from every region came together to pray at the Cathedral for the progress of the gospel in every community. And every church throughout the diocese was provided with prayer points to pray for the evangelistic ministry of their neighbouring parishes in their Mission Areas. I trust and pray this happens regularly, but what an encouragement to know that every Sydney Anglican Church was praying for gospel fruit in the ministry of the neighbouring churches. What a wonderful expression of our partnership in the gospel.

There have been many other expressions of such gospel minded collaboration.

I'm delighted by the motion on the Business Paper from the South West Regional Council that simply encourages the Mission Areas to make time for every rector to share with the Mission Area his church's evangelism plan for feedback, prayer and encouragement. We're not in a competition, we're not building our own kingdoms, we're not superheroes – we need prayer, we need encouragement, we need the fellowship of accountability, and mutual strengthening. I'm so thankful for this simple but powerful idea, and the heart that gives rise to it. We want every church to be fruitful for the Lord.

And on the ground, churches in Mission Areas are being creative and collaborative in wonderful ways. The Macarthur Mission Area has just hosted the Macarthur Mens' Conference for its second year. Last year, the Toongabbie and Wentworthville Mission areas held a joint Moore College mission and have continued to share training opportunities and

encourage each other in local evangelism. Dundas and Greystanes are partnering in Sunday services, and share one Treasurer and one Safe Ministry Rep, enabling others to serve in other ways. In the Northern Beaches a recent night of prayer for the spread of the gospel was attended by 400 people from thirteen Anglican churches. Some of the older saints said they couldn't remember such a thing taking place for fifty years. I hope you find this thrilling. And there is much, much more. I hope as we meet together in Synod you will lean across the seats and ask the people around you – what is the Lord doing where you are? What can I pray that the Lord would do in the days ahead?

A Prayerful 5% Goal

Last year's Synod asked the Standing Committee to report to this Synod about its response to the Attendance Patterns report. Motion 4 is the outcome of the work undertaken by the Standing Committee. The heart of it is in two parts. First, to invite all parts of the diocesan fellowship to join in a special five-year focus to prayerfully seek to grow our attendance in churches by five percent for each of the next five years, through conversion of the lost through faith in Jesus. And second, to encourage all parishes to increase their allocation of resources to ministry with children and youth each year for five years.

Let me make a couple of observations about this. First, it is an invitation, not an instruction. We treasure the local church and affirm that the Spirit equips and guides every local fellowship to undertake the work of ministry in the place where the Lord has sent them. You know how to evangelise your community, and I'm grateful for every effort you make to do so.

But this is an invitation to all of us to agree and join together to pray and plan in an intentional and sustained way about the progress of the gospel through each local church. You will need to do this work with others in your church.

Second, the 5% number arises from a national conversation that has been initiated by The Gospel Coalition Australia across like-minded denominations. It is not a way of telling God what to do, it is a way of making every local church ask, what should we do? The answers will be as different as the churches.

The Attendance Patterns report showed that some of the smaller churches had more conversions, and some of the larger churches tended to grow by transfer. Large churches can attract people because of the scale of their programs. But attenders is not the same as believers. In a church of 300, a prayerful goal of fifteen new Christians in church every year for five years, is enough to create real change. In a church of 80 people, a prayerful goal of 5% growth in new believers, would be thinking about 4 people in a year. And that might not require

a revolution in what is happening now – but it might be a spur and a focus and generate prayer and expectation and perseverance in the work of making Jesus known to others.

Third, God is far more committed to the salvation of the lost than we are. Would a prayerful goal for new believers at our church, better align ourselves with the beating heart of God?

The marvellous Hope for the Illawarra mission that took place earlier this year, produced a training course on being an inviter because they found that in many of the churches people lacked the confidence and the skills to invite someone to an event where they would hear the gospel. Do people in your church need training in praying for the lost, inviting a friend to an event or sharing the gospel themselves? Contact the Wollongong Regional office if you want to get your hands on it.

I heard recently of two women who became Christians after attending English Language classes at two different churches that had the word ‘welcome’ in their language on the church’s street sign. Now if you put the word ‘welcome’ on your street sign in the language of one or more of the cultural groups who live in your suburb, and someone from those groups came to church, what would you do next to help them find out about Jesus? Have you got a plan for that?

In some parts of Sydney, when a person becomes a Christian from another cultural background they can’t tell anyone, because it would disrupt too many relationships or even put their safety at risk. Likewise, many churches are finding that it takes longer for someone to become a Christian even if they are attending church regularly. You might have someone who’s ‘on the way’ but take several years before they are willing to say ‘I turn to Christ’.

My point is, our ministry contexts are gloriously varied. Our ministry ‘tactics’ will vary. But can we commit ourselves to the prayerful work of seeking under God, to see 5% growth at every church through people coming to know Christ and confess him as Lord?

Strengthening Youth and Children’s Ministry

The Standing Committee is also encouraging all parishes to seek to increase their allocation of resources to ministry with children and youth during the period of the special five-year focus. Again, this is an encouragement to reflect and review your allocation of resources. Every church is different. But it may be that your church is surrounded by many young people and children who don’t know Christ, and their families, but is struggling to effectively connect with them or has even given up trying.

Anecdotally, there is evidence that youth groups that used to be comprised of large numbers of young people from families that were not associated with church, are increasingly

comprised of young people from church families, who also attend church schools or Christian schools. Church families look to their church to play a role in encouraging their children to trust and follow Jesus, but unbelieving parents are less likely to ask us to share the gospel with their children. We need to make that decision in advance and allocate time, money and space in our weekly and annual programs and in our buildings to seeking to bring the gospel to young people who do not already have a connection with church. There is opportunity here.

SRE is the largest public ministry on our front doorstep providing as it does wonderful opportunity in NSW public schools. We have over 2000 teachers from 250 of our churches involved in 1050 schools. Isn't that magnificent! It's challenging, it requires resources, there is opposition from secularists. But the opportunity to commend Christ and nurture faith among tens of thousands of young people every week must be grasped, and I praise God for those (heroes!) who are doing so. Can your church be more prayerful for SRE in your local schools? Are there ministry staff and church members who can be released for this work, and are willing to do so?

McCrindle has reported a renewal in the spiritual search among Australians and that Gen Z (those who are now between the ages of 13 and 28) are more likely than any of the older generations to have had spiritual conversations, thought about the meaning of life, thought about God, prayed or read the Bible.

And while the number of Gen Z young people who identify as 'practising Christians' is around 10% there is another of 20% of Gen Z women and a surprising 30% of Gen Z men who identify as Christian but are not actively practising faith. We should not acquiesce in a narrative that young people are uninterested in faith in general, or Jesus in particular. There is plenty of evidence to the contrary, just as there is evidence of a battle for the soul of young men, especially. Are we ready to speak to them of the Lord who loved them and gave himself for them?

Youthworks can help you think this through!

In the diocese of Sydney we are remarkably well served in youth and children's' ministry by Youthworks. The YW team are faithful, and highly skilled practitioners, as well as leaders in thinking about ministry to young people and children, in our cultural moment. Many of you can speak of the impact of the Youthworks Ministry Support team in strengthening the youth and children's ministry of your church.

Youthworks can point to 175 churches who engaged with the three, soon to be four, annual LIT, Leaders in Training, camps now seeing over 1000 senior high youth attend. There are three Square One kids ministry camps with over 900 children in attendance drawn from our local

church children's ministries. Both these camp programs have nearly doubled in the past 4 years since COVID! Youthworks has seen recent growth in the number of young people making professions of faith in local Church youth and children's ministry programs, ranging from 5% to 50%.

Youth ministry has also been the sphere of gospel-minded collaboration in Mission Areas. Parramatta Mission Area held a combined youth night earlier this year. One hundred teenagers attended and 5 gave their lives to Christ. Six churches from the Harbour and Chatswood/Lane Cove Mission Areas ran a youth event in August where 200 young people and leaders came together to pray and be equipped to reach their friends. Four of the Bayside Mission Area churches held a combined Young Adults camp with 60 in attendance from a dozen cultural backgrounds. Twenty-three youth groups from the Inner West churches combined for an event attended by 500 teenagers but perhaps even more encouraging is the weekly combined youth group of Leichhardt and Village Annadale which has resulted in a critical mass of about 25 attenders, four times the size of the groups that previously existed. And the thirteen churches of the Northern Beaches held a youth event at one of our schools, St Luke's Dee Why, with 570 young people in attendance, 110 of whom stood to profess Christ as their Lord and Saviour. Praise God. I'm so grateful for these efforts and my prayer is that every church will consider how to more effectively reach children and young people.

The Attendance Patterns report presented to Synod last year showed that in the 2022-2023 year, there was a post-covid recovery in attendance of 11%. We are praising God that this has continued in the last year, and total attendances across the diocese have gone up by a further 4.5%. Of the 18 Mission Areas that decreased in attendance between 2013-2023, 14 increased in the last year. Four of our five regions saw an increase in the last twelve months; Western Sydney had a 2% decrease this year. Average weekly attendance fell from 47,801 in 2013 to 44,598 in 2023 but has bounced back somewhat in 2024 to 46,594.

We give thanks for such encouragements; for faithful, persevering and prayerful ministry, and its fruit. And we praise God for his sovereign grace.

Synod, can we commit ourselves under God to prayerfully seek his work among us to see every church in the diocese grow by 5% in each of the next five years through the conversion of adults, youth and children to faith in Christ? I hope we will do so.

The work of an overseer is a noble task, but also demanding – physically, intellectually, emotionally, relationally – most of all spiritually. We have an enemy, though not flesh and blood. I am immensely thankful and if I may say so reverently, proud, of the Lord's servants in our diocese – the senior ministers of our churches, along with the ministry teams of lay and ordained fellow workers, chaplains and the legion of brothers and sisters who voluntarily

serve in myriad ways week by week. We are not seeking to burden anyone, or demand that you find your own straw to make bricks. We serve a Lord who is gentle and lowly in heart, whose yoke is easy and who gives rest to the weary.

But I trust and pray that a shared goal focussed on the lost being saved may concentrate our attention and fuel our prayers, stir our hearts, embolden our plans, create courageous change and stimulate new or persevering initiatives to see more people saved.

The Standing Committee was also asked to consider the consequences of continued attendance decline and to report on measures to avoid such outcomes. The Special Five-Year Focus report provides the Standing Committee's response. These are matters which go to the heart of our shared mission and fellowship. I want to mention two in particular.

Evangelism and Ministry Partnerships

First, nine of the report's recommendations refer to EMP – the provisional Evangelism and Ministry Partnerships organisation to which Canon Phil Colgan has recently been appointed as interim Head. EMP is the product of our plans to bring together, amongst other things, the work of Evangelism and New Churches, Ministry Training and Development, and Anglican Media. I am deeply grateful to the Boards and CEOs of ENC, MT&D and the Anglican Media Council for their grace, humility, trust and considered engagement in this reform process.

The central organisations that have been created by the Synod exist to serve the local churches in pursuit of mission in the diocese. We have one all-encompassing purpose - to make and mature disciples of Jesus – it's not rocket science, but it has energised the church of Jesus for twenty centuries.

In Sydney, we have created organisations to help us get the most out of our common commitments - to the authority of God's Word, the urgency of the proclamation of the gospel, the necessity of personal response in repentance and faith towards Jesus, our dependence upon the work of the Holy Spirit to enable the mission and to bring fruit from our work that endures to eternity. I have encouraged our fellowship to talk together, plan together and work together – communicate, coordinate and collaborate - to ensure that we steward our resources in the most fruitful way possible to see Sydney won for Christ.

The intention in creating Evangelism and Ministry Partnerships is to put the 'people' functions of the diocese in the same room with the evangelism and church planting functions and the communications functions so that they work together, inform each other's thinking and practice, and present to those whom God is raising up from among us a clear pathway into ministry in this Sydney Anglican fellowship; one that accompanies, supports, trains and sustains them on the whole journey.

The report recommends that EMP work with the Bishops and other diocesan organisations like the Centre for Ministry Development, as well as trusted non-Diocesan partners to consider a number of projects: to strengthen church leaders and especially senior ministers; to create a Church Health Support Team to assist the churches experiencing decline; to support the specialised needs of leaders of larger churches; to develop a transparent church planting strategy that includes a pipeline for potential church planters, and fostering collaboration among churches for the purpose of planting churches and multiplying the number of believers, churches and leaders of all kinds of ministries.

The goals are substantial and aspirational. Such things will not be achieved merely by creating a new structure. They will take prayerful planning, cheerful hard work, courageous change, new priorities. Sydney needs to be converted! What more can we do given our history, legacy, theological unity and the opportunity of this cultural moment?

Putting Property on Mission

A second issue which is revisited in the Five-Year Focus report is the need for us to continue to engage with the property needs of ministry across the diocese. Sydney Anglicans have planted churches since St Philip's planted the Garrison in 1840. In 2022 the Synod tasked Sydney Anglican Property (as it is now known) with developing a diocesan-wide, ministry-led property strategy. (This is the point where I make my annual joke about acronyms and the DWMLPS.) The need for regional and diocesan consideration of the distribution and use of our property assets is essential because 95% of Greater Sydney and the Illawarra is not yet Christian. By 2050, the population of Sydney is expected to be over 8 million people according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. That's at least another 2.5 million people, with more than half living west of Parramatta. But more than 70% of our buildings and ministries are located east of Parramatta. We currently hold eight sites in the greenfields areas, where we hope to plant new churches in coming years. In Box Hill, Catherine Field and Marsden Park we now have three churches meeting in schools or community centres awaiting the construction of church buildings. Plans are also underway to construct a new church building at our greenfield site in Riverstone.

The Regional Property strategies are developed by Sydney Anglican Property in close consultation with Regional Bishops, Mission Area leaders and parishes, and seek to ensure that every parish has the appropriate buildings and property to support local ministry and evangelism for the next 30 years. In some locations, this will highlight a need for additional buildings and property to reach growing areas in both emerging and established suburbs. In other places, the strategies highlight the opportunity for parishes with more property than needed to sell or redevelop to support new mission outside their parish.

The 2% Land Acquisition Levy has been a timely, essential and fruitful expression of fellowship across our network as every church has contributed to the resources that have allowed us to purchase land in new areas before getting priced out of the area. This year, praise God, we have acquired sites in Appin and Orchard Hills. In the next thirty years, there will be 50,000 people within a short drive of Appin, and another 40,000 around Orchard Hills. These two purchases made in the same month earlier this year, were only possible because of this Synod's decision in 2022 to lock in the 2% Land Acquisition Levy for ten years, that allowed Sydney Anglican Property to establish a Greenfields Loan Facility.

And yet we need to purchase more land than the 2% levy can fund, and we need to build contemporary multipurpose buildings in new areas and redevelop existing buildings to provide income streams to fund new ministry. The Regional Strategies are invitational not prescriptive. It is local church Parish Councils, Mission Areas and Regional Councils that need to prayerfully reflect on whether they control buildings and property assets that could be used more effectively than they are currently, and whether there is an opportunity for mission minded sacrificial generosity to release funds from property assets for the sake of the spread of the gospel and the salvation of generations in the years to come. We must be proactive if we are to reach our city.

This is not something new for Sydney Anglicans. Back in 1985, the Longueville, Mowbray and Lane Cove parishes each decided to sell branch churches in order to contribute to the *Vision for Growth* strategy. The 20 members of one of those churches decided they could join their parent church. They said, "although we love this building, it is being used for only a few hours per week when it could be sold to provide a church in a new area with a community of 25,000 people." *Vision for Growth* saw churches planted and ministries strengthened in 20 suburbs in Western Sydney and South Western Sydney.

In 2004, Neutral Bay Anglican Church chose to give the proceeds from the sale of St Chad's Cremorne Point to support the building project at Hoxton Park, and in 2016 South Head Anglican (formerly Watsons' Bay), donated \$900,000 from the sale of the Wentworth Memorial Church to assist in the construction of Hope Anglican Leppington.

Nor is this something from the long distant past. In the last couple of years, Church Hill Anglican made a windfall profit through property holdings and decided, wonderfully to give it all away. More than \$3.5 million. This enabled the purchase of an existing childcare centre and house in Bomaderry to be repurposed into a new ministry home for Shoalhaven Aboriginal Community Church on the South Coast. It also funded the purchase of a separate minister's house. This generosity also extended to a substantial donation towards the construction of the church building for Marsden Park Anglican Church in the north-west

growth corridor of Sydney currently meeting, literally, in a shed at Marsden Park Anglican College.

The Synod has previously adopted property receipts policies that assist churches to share in the mission in the diocese beyond their parish boundaries. But some churches voluntarily make more available. For example, St Anne's Strathfield allocated \$2.5 million of the proceeds of a sale towards construction of a building for Marsden Park, retaining a much smaller amount for work on their own buildings. The decisions of the Synod as the representatives of the churches as well decisions made in the local church reflect that we are a community of gospel generosity. How wonderful this is! Praise the Lord!

In none of these cases are we 'selling off the farm'. But like Australia's remarkable farmers, we are seeking to make the farm more productive, expanding into new harvest fields and seeking not just a bigger harvest but an eternal one. We must not leave our talent buried, but like the good and faithful servant, invest for our Master who has secured for us an inheritance that will never perish, spoil or fade.

St Anne's Ryde, St Matthew's Manly, St James King Street, St John's Parramatta – notwithstanding their own significant needs for investment in property, are consistently generous in supporting the establishment of new churches in new communities. How could your property serve God's mission beyond your parish, to see the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus in new communities and the lost won for Christ?

Freedom to Pray

In April of this year, the NSW Conversion Practices Ban Act 2024 came into effect. In 2018, the Synod of our Diocese expressed its opposition to so-called 'gay conversion therapy' including psychological practices that have been ineffective and caused distress to people who experience exclusive same sex attraction. We noted that prayer is not such a practice.

At the time the legislation was being debated in the NSW Parliament in March 2024, I wrote an op-ed piece published in the Sydney press in which I said, '...legislation such as this illegitimately seeks to regulate what people can say and do in the ordinary course of living out their faith, and what faith groups may teach and promote in their communities and the wider society. These are grave intrusions into the lives of families, individuals and religious communities...'

As a result of sustained engagement with the government by a number of parties, including Bishop Michael Stead, representing the Diocese of Sydney, NSW adopted a form of these laws that is not as bad as in some other Australian jurisdictions. But they cannot be considered good laws. The Act purports to give churches, schools and parents permission to teach about

sexual orientation, gender identity, sexual activity and religion. But, respectfully, we do not need the permission of the government to teach about such things.

And according to the Act, some things may be unlawful in certain circumstances: a one to one conversation or a pastoral meeting for the purpose of studying God's word; or prayer for the work of the Holy Spirit to bring self-control, to overcome temptation to sexual sin and pursue godly living. Such things may be unlawful even though the participants are adults, and even if the meeting and prayer has been requested.

Legislation of this type, the like of which we have never seen before in its attempt to regulate the teaching and practice of Christians and other faith groups, has a couple of outcomes, whether intended or not, that are deeply concerning. The first is that the legislation will intimidate people into self-censorship. In other words, in contexts where the truth of God's word in matters relating to sexuality, marriage, identity and gender should be and can be freely taught, people will choose not to do so for fear of transgressing the law or provoking a complaint – even if it would not ultimately be upheld.

The other even more tragic and painful outcome is that someone, maybe even a minister, may decline to pray with a Christian brother or sister, or a person who is seeking to know what God's mind is on these matters, and to live in accordance with God's will. Such people, precious in God's sight, may not be able to find someone to walk alongside them, to pray with them and to encourage them as they seek to live a godly life in obedience to God's word and aligned with God's purposes. This cannot be. We must not be deterred from praying for and with people who earnestly seek to live in accordance with God's word and will.

In May of this year I wrote to all lay and ordained ministers including school chaplains and youth ministers. I noted that we may not have clarity about the operation of the Act until civil and possibly criminal cases are determined by the relevant tribunals and courts. In the meantime, I advised them to be familiar with the Act, to keep notes of pastoral conversations and to 'continue to confidently teach on the subject of sexuality, marriage and gender in accordance with the truth and trustworthiness of God's word, including the implications for Christian discipleship; and with the respect and care of all people that is our usual pastoral pattern.'

I concluded by saying – and I want to state clearly and publicly to you all - that 'I will stand by any clergyperson or church worker who finds themselves brought before a tribunal or court because of this poorly conceived law. We must not be silenced or intimidated from teaching God's good plan for human sexuality and relationships. We will insist on the freedom to do so, respectfully but without fear.'

We will obey God. We can do nothing less.

Director of Indigenous Ministry

What has been known as the diocese of Sydney since 1847 stands today on the ancient ancestral lands of the Kuring-Gai nation in our north, the Eora, Tharawal and Yuin nations along our coast and the Dharug and Gundungurra nations to our west and south-west. I'm glad to acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of this Synod and I honour the pastors and elders who serve in our Sydney Anglican Indigenous churches and ministries. We praise God that he has planted and is building his church among the first peoples of these lands and that in Christ he is uniting to himself all things whether in heaven or on earth.

In February, it was joy to commission the Reverend Michael Duckett as the diocese's first Director of Indigenous Ministry. About 150 members, leaders and supporters of Sydney Anglican Indigenous churches and ministries gathered here at the Wesley Chapel (there was a wedding at the Cathedral!) to commend Michael to the Lord in his new role.

Last year, this Synod agreed to establish this new leadership position in the life of our diocese. This was the outcome of recommendations from the Sydney Anglican Indigenous People's Ministry Committee that there was a need to provide for diocesan Indigenous leadership.

In the report, Michael Duckett as chair of the committee said this:

As Chair of SAIPMC, I am thankful for the way the Diocese has seen fit to provide for Indigenous ministry over the last 18 years. We have been able to make progress in our mission and ministry, but the time has come for clearer leadership and a stronger integration of Indigenous ministry and representation into the Diocese. The primary reason for this is that the opportunities are plentiful but complex and without the strategic appointment of a leader who can represent and drive ministry forward, we remain on the fringe of decision-making (and sometimes without any power to make decisions.)

The Sydney Doctrine Commission paper on the theology of reconciliation makes clear that the exclusion of Aboriginal people from decision-making and the structures of institutional power is one of the failings of our church and has been a painful injustice against our Aboriginal brothers and sisters in Christ. The creation of this position and the appointment of Michael is another small step in repenting of that and finding a better way forward.

The Director of Indigenous Ministries is developing training pathways for Indigenous ministry in the Diocese, support structures for Indigenous churches, including succession and church planting, and offers cultural awareness and guidance for the churches, schools and agencies

within the Diocese, as well as representing the diocese in national Anglican and other contexts.

The Synod agreed to contribute to the funding of this new position and to ensure that the Director of Indigenous Ministry is a perpetual member of the Synod and of the Standing Committee. And it has been wonderful, since Michael Duckett's appointment in February to welcome him to the monthly meetings of the Standing Committee, where diocesan policy is made. We are glad and grateful to have you with us, Michael.

I informed the Synod last year that I have initiated an Indigenous History project in the diocese, the purpose of which is to bring to light the experience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in their engagement with the Sydney Anglican Church.

A symposium is planned and papers are being commissioned. Longer term, my hope is that the project will provide the opportunity of listening to the stories of Aboriginal people who have been part of the diocese for a long time so that we can understand and learn from the past and forge a deeper partnership in bringing the gospel to the tens of thousands of first nations people who live in the diocese but have little connection with Christ.

There is much to lament in the history of the Anglican Church in Sydney and its engagement with Aboriginal people – and we must not fear or evade our history. We were among the first to benefit from the dispossession of the first inhabitants of these lands as far back as the first grant of land to the Chaplain, Richard Johnson.

But in the midst of injustice and dispossession, Aboriginal people have believed the gospel. The first baptised Aboriginal adult man in Sydney was a son of the famous leader Bennelong, given the baptismal name, Thomas Coke Walker Bennelong. The missionary who discipled him recorded in his journal that as soon as Thomas believed, he began to share the good news with his own people.

Uncle Ray Minniecon, the inaugural Chair of SAIPMC said at Michael's commissioning that their first goal was to evangelise first nations people in Sydney. Michael has the same heart of compassion for his people, and I trust it is one that we will gladly share.

God uses means

Conversion – bringing people to repentance from their sins and faith towards Jesus – is God's sovereign work, from eternity to eternity – electing, calling, converting, sealing, glorifying those upon whom he has settled his love from before the world began. But Scripture also teaches that God uses means. People are called into relationship with his Son through

repentance and faith, by the power of the Holy Spirit as the gospel is proclaimed and in response to the prayers of his people.

All this is from God, the apostle Paul says, in 2 Corinthians 5:18, God reconciling the world to himself through the death of Jesus on the Cross, not counting our sins against us. *And he has committed to us the ministry of reconciliation* (v19b). So Paul says, ‘we try to persuade others’ (v11), ‘we are Christ’s ambassadors as though God were making his appeal through us’ (v20a), ‘we implore you on Christ’s behalf’ – in all of this Paul says he is ‘compelled by the love of Christ’ (v14). All this is from God – but God has left to the apostles, a ministry of reconciliation that involves appealing, imploring, persuading, and the Scriptures use many other words to describe the evangelistic ministry of the apostles - ‘declaring’, ‘proclaiming’, ‘testifying’.

The apostolic commission has become the apostolic pattern – faithful ministry today, depends on consistency with the message and the ministry of the apostles. God uses means. He does *his* work of bringing people to faith and repentance through the work he has left to *us*, the preaching of the apostolic gospel of Jesus and the prayers of his people, in the power of his Spirit.

I believe in conversion – I see the evidence all around that you believe in it too. Under God, that is the work in which we share and to which we commit ourselves again as we meet in this Synod.

And now, to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

Kanishka Raffel
Archbishop of Sydney