

**President's Address
To the 16th General Synod of
The Anglican Church of Australia
At St Peter's College, Adelaide
30th June 2014**

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Archbishop of Brisbane and
Primate of Australia**

It is my privilege to welcome you to and to address this 16th General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia. To gather like this from every diocese in the nation and with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives is to be reminded of the richness and diversity of people who make up this Church and of the many communities in which we serve Christ and the people Christ loves. Before we launch into our business it is important and right that we begin with thanks to God for calling us into this Church and for each other, companions in the journey of faith and partners in Christ's mission.

Most of you will be aware I have decided to step aside as Primate at the conclusion of this session of the General Synod, though under the Canon I could continue until October. I have taken that decision for three main reasons. First, it respects the principle in our new rules adopted in 2007, that a Primate may serve for a maximum of nine consecutive years. Having been elected in July 2005, nine years is now up. Secondly, the Archbishop of Canterbury has set himself a demanding schedule to visit every Primate early in his tenure to assist in fostering relationships within the international Anglican Communion. Archbishop Welby has advised me of his intention to visit the Primate of Australia in August 2014. It is clear to me that the Archbishop should meet with the incoming Primate with whom he will work in the years ahead, rather than with me in the final days of my term. Thirdly, our General

Secretary's contract concludes three months after this session of General Synod. Standing Committee has gratefully accepted Martin's generous offer to extend his service for a brief period but not beyond March 2015. A top priority for the new Primate is to identify and appoint a new General Secretary. For these reasons I will stand aside on Friday and allow the new Primate to assume office and proceed with these responsibilities. I am sure he will do so surrounded by the prayers, goodwill and support of the whole Church.

It is a great honour and privilege to hold the office of Primate though it can be uncomfortable. Widespread expectations are focused on the office that are not matched by constitutional or canonical powers to deliver results. That often leads to deep disappointment and frustration on the part of church members, lay and ordained, and members of the general public alike. The Primate is not the CEO of the Anglican Church of Australia and cannot direct any bishop, priest, deacon or lay person, employee or volunteer outside his or her own diocese. We might understand that, but many within the church and even more looking on from outside do not.

Similarly the nature of our very weak federation is largely not understood either within the church or outside it. While we refer to ourselves as 'The Anglican Church of Australia' and there is widespread perception in the community of the Anglican Church as a unified, coherent entity, the reality is quite different.

Every Primate and every General Synod in the life of this Anglican Church of Australia wrestles in one way or another with the unity and diversity of the Church and with its very dispersed authority structure. How do we cohere in the face of diversity and difference and with very weak national offices and instruments?

Two spotlights currently on us have brought these issues to the fore once again. We are being forced to ask ourselves, once more, whether our existing Constitutional and organisational arrangements are serving us well and enabling us in the best possible way to minister to Australia in the 21st century.

Current urgent issues

Child Protection and the Royal Commission

The first spotlight concerns child protection. The 2001 General Synod established our first Child Protection Committee. The 2004 Synod endorsed a raft of measures to make the church safe for children and to deal properly with allegations of abuse. In the decade since work has continued unabated. The General Synod website now displays a wide range of resources and tools to ensure child safety. We have focused on both preventing abuse from occurring and responding to allegations and instances of abuse in the best possible way. The resources we have developed include –

- Faithfulness in Service – a code of conduct and a discussion guide for training
- Support of clergy and churchworkers – a guide to self care
- Guidelines on the use of technology
- Safe ministry training benchmarks

- A model for selecting and accrediting church workers in parishes
- Safe ministry checks for paid and volunteer church workers, clergy and ordination candidates
- A guide to Referee Checks before making appointments
- Guidelines for risk assessments relating to sexual abuse
- Guidelines for psychological assessments for ordination candidates
- The National Register and procedures for using it
- Guidelines for providing pastoral care to people who have been abused
- Pastoral care and assistance principles
- Guidelines for reporting historical child sexual abuse to Police
- Curriculum for training Professional Standards Board members
- Guidelines for parishes where a person of concern attends worship and template documents for managing such situations
- Guidelines for considering the future of those who have engaged in misconduct or sexual abuse

In addition to these extensive resources the website includes progress reports and programmes for action in relation to each of the General Synods of 2004, 2007 and 2010 as well as a Study of Reported Child Sexual Abuse in the Anglican Church, commissioned by us, conducted by independent researchers and published in 2009.

Clearly this represents enormous effort by many, many people, not least our Professional Standards Commission to whom the whole church owes a great debt of gratitude.

Is it sufficient? No it is not. Notwithstanding all this excellent work, the spotlight being shone by the current Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse is highlighting that further work is required.

In November 2012, the Standing Committee welcomed the announcement of the Royal Commission. It also repeated the apology of the 13th General Synod in 2004 to all those who have been sexually abused by clergy and church workers of the Anglican Church of Australia.

Standing Committee established a Working Group to assist this Church to participate in the Royal Commission's work and called on every diocese and associated Anglican schools and agencies to cooperate fully.

The Standing Committee saw the advent of the Royal Commission as an opportunity for this Church to review its policies and procedures to protect children and to check that we are doing all we could in this area. Specifically it asked the Working Group, among other things, to –

1. 'facilitate a review of past complaints ... to dioceses ... schools and agencies and ensure that all appropriate steps have been taken' (2012/2/16 2.b.)
2. 'identify national best practice policies and procedures ... and facilitate their implementation by the dioceses ... schools and agencies' (2012/2/16 2.d.); and
3. 'contribute to the development of a more national framework for child protection' (2012/2/16 2.h.).

Implicit in these tasks is a conviction that what is required is a coherent, united, consistent national approach that will ensure best practice across the dioceses, schools and agencies.

Unfortunately, however, the aspirations reflected in that 2012 resolution have proved elusive, for three reasons. First, the complexity and scale of the tasks are greater than was originally anticipated. Secondly, to undertake that work comprehensively requires substantial resourcing. Work of this magnitude cannot simply be tacked on to the existing responsibilities of the General Secretary or be undertaken by the handful of already busy volunteers that comprise the Working Group and the Professional Standards Commission. Thirdly, the Working Group could not **require** dioceses, schools and agencies to provide information or to take any of the other actions envisaged in the resolution. As a result responses have been patchy and the work remains incomplete.

The Working Group is finding it difficult to meet the Standing Committee's, that is to say the Church's, own aspirations and expectations.

On top of that the proceedings of the Royal Commission have highlighted a mismatch between community perceptions and expectations and the reality of the Church's life. The Royal Commission appears to be concerned that the Church's organisation and structure may work unfairly and inconsistently for victims of child sexual abuse. For example:

- Measures for preventing child sexual abuse vary from diocese to diocese as do rules and processes for dealing with reports of abuse
- Rules and mechanisms for determining financial payments and other supports for victims vary from diocese to diocese, raising important questions of fairness

- Some dioceses have greater capacity to pay than others but there is no mechanism to achieve parity of treatment of victims and no national fund exists to support dioceses unable to satisfy their obligations to victims
- There is no way to check whether dioceses are acting in accordance with their own policies and procedures nor whether they have responded appropriately to the various recommendations of the General Synod, Standing Committee and Professional Standards Commission over the last decade.

In relation to this last issue I'm pleased to report that, at the national bishops meeting earlier this year, the bishops unanimously agreed to support their dioceses' participation in a voluntary professional standards auditing program. The scheme envisages an independent professional auditor visiting a diocese and working with diocesan personnel to ensure the diocese has appropriate policies and procedures in place and that they are being properly implemented. The auditor will take into account the various recommendations made by the General Synod and will make recommendations to the bishop and bishop-in-council for continuing improvement.

While neither the General Synod, nor the Standing Committee, nor the Primate, nor the General Secretary has any power to compel compliance, this voluntary auditing scheme is a step in the right direction. I imagine any bishop and any diocesan council would wholeheartedly embrace the opportunity to be assured that all relevant steps are being taken in that diocese to protect children and to improve performance in this area. I hope the General Synod will endorse this initiative as it continues to address the larger picture.

Overall, though, it is fair to say that the Royal Commission appears to have been surprised by the situation it has encountered in the Anglican Church of Australia. The dispersed nature of authority, and the lack of consistency flowing from it, appear to concern the Commission because it can lead to unfairness for victims of child sexual abuse and inconsistency in their treatment. The Commission is clearly considering whether or not there should be a consistent, uniform national response to these issues and, if so, the means to achieve it.

It will not have escaped the attention of many that this is the third successive General Synod at which we have before us extensive documentation attempting to deal coherently and consistently with complaints against bishops, with Episcopal standards. Previous attempts to achieve a uniform national approach through a General Synod Canon have failed. This time we have before us a model ordinance proposed to be put in place at a diocesan level under diocesan control. While it honours the value of adapting to local circumstances, the risk involved in such an approach, yet again, is diversity of practise among the dioceses leading to confusion both within the Church and more broadly in the wider community.

Diocesan Finances

The second area currently under the spotlight concerns the financial health of dioceses. The Diocesan Financial Advisory Group was established in the 1990s to assist dioceses to improve the quality of their financial reporting. A small group of volunteers, expert in financial management and governance, willingly undertook what has turned out to be a significant and growing role. Initially DFAG reviewed the published accounts of dioceses

and other General Synod organisations every two years. But DFAG soon discovered that not only was the quality of reporting a concern, there were serious underlying financial and governance issues.

DFAG reported to Standing Committee in November 2013-

the financial health of the Anglican Church in Australia, outside of the large metropolitan Dioceses, appears to be in a parlous state. What's more, in light of relevant trends (e.g. population shifts, changing demographics, declining church memberships, etc) it is hard to see how many Dioceses will remain sustainable into the near future (my emphasis, DFAG Report to Standing Committee, November 2013, pp.1-2).

DFAG went on to report that at that time six (6) dioceses were recognised by their own registrars as not being financially sustainable and that another three (3) were in serious financial circumstances.

Over the last few years DFAG has become concerned about:

1. The extent of governance and business acumen available to dioceses;
2. The risks posed to dioceses by involvement in significant business activities such as schools, aged care and bank-like operations without adequate expertise, resources or controls;
3. 'the genuine impediments caused by the current structure of the Church, including that most church assets are held in trusts which legally are very difficult to unwind'; and that

4. Failures in any one diocese are expected to have significant consequences for other dioceses and indeed for other religious and charitable bodies.

DFAG said that its attention had been increasingly directed towards structural, that is to say, whole-of-church challenges and possible responses. It said, ‘We believe there is a “burning platform” which requires urgent attention now.’

DFAG proposed ‘Centres of Excellence’ to provide dioceses with services like financial information to support decision-making, improving governance, control, regulatory compliance and risk management. A significant additional benefit of such Centres of Excellence, said DFAG, would be to free up local people, including bishops, to focus attention on ministry and growth.

The rubber hit the road with the estimated cost to undertake a proper feasibility study and produce a business plan. The price tag of \$180,000 frightened diocesan registrars and Standing Committee tended to think that the smaller dioceses which would benefit most from such centres probably couldn’t afford to pay for those services, and the larger dioceses that could afford the services probably mostly already had them in place. The General Synod would also have been required to commit significant resources to the project with resulting impacts on diocesan assessments already under pressure.

In the end the prospects for such a centre didn’t look strong, even though DFAG had said action was needed within months and that ‘Without such a Centre the Anglican Church is extremely exposed to the failure of one or more Dioceses’ with the consequences it had identified.

As long ago as 1998 (16 years) the Constitution Review Commission had warned the General Synod ‘Unless we can find a way to address these issues it will be economics rather than theology that will determine our future’ (CRC issues paper to 1998 General Synod). Approaching two decades later, we have not yet found a way to address the issues.

Well-known underlying problems

These two areas I’ve canvassed are vitally important in and of themselves. And yet on a broader canvass they are the current manifestations of issues that are familiar to us. In broad terms, it is clear that

- some dioceses lack sufficient expertise, resources and/or attention to do what is required in crucial areas including sexual abuse and discipline of clergy and church workers; governance, financial management and risk management;
- some dioceses facing particular challenges in such areas have, sometimes initially and sometimes in an ongoing way, resisted or rejected recommendations, advice, support and assistance from outside, including by General Synod bodies and officers;
- there is a lack of authority (and capacity and resources) in any other church body, including the General Synod and its bodies and officers, to ensure that what is required is actually done.

These issues put at great risk the ability of the Church to deliver on its mission and undermine its credibility and trustworthiness in the wider community.

Problems of this sort are not new. The underlying issues have long been identified.

Back in 1992, that's 22 years ago now, the General Synod established the Constitution Review Commission to 'revise completely the Church's Constitution, to enable it to function properly in the 21st Century' (CRC Report to General Synod 1998). The Commission repeatedly emphasised that it did not see its task as a legalistic one or playing with structures for the sake of the exercise. Rather, it was concerned to anticipate as far as possible what conditions the Church would face in the 21st Century and to discern what it would need to be effective and flexible in those conditions. It didn't want the Church to be 'shackled by archaic structures' and inhibited from doing what was sensible (CRC Issues Paper 13 August 1997).

Following consultation around the country, the Commission identified six main areas for attention in a 1997 Issues Paper that went to General Synod in 1998. They were spelled out further in a comprehensive report to the 2001 General Synod. Similar ground has been canvassed in subsequent reports to the Standing Committee and in discussions of various task forces and working groups. The following clusters of issues are well known.

1. Dioceses

The strengths problems and needs of the 23 dioceses are quite different.

Financial resources differ markedly among dioceses. Some large parishes in wealthy dioceses have larger budgets than some country dioceses. Clergy in wealthy dioceses are

paid significantly more than those in poorer dioceses. Parish contributions to the dioceses vary from 3 cents in the dollar to 34 cents in the dollar.

Theological differences prevent closer cooperation among dioceses.

In 2001 the Commission anticipated that in the near future there would need to be restructuring of the dioceses as some would not be viable for much longer. It proposed a 'less stressful procedure for the amalgamation of dioceses or abolition of provinces'. Its concern over a decade ago about the financial viability of dioceses has been subsequently reiterated by DFAG and by the recent Viability and Structures Task Force that is reporting to this General Synod.

2. The roles and powers of dioceses in relation to the roles and powers of the General Synod

While the name Anglican Church of Australia implies a unified concept, we are in fact 23 dioceses each with a high degree of autonomy. The one Church is arranged in such a way that the political control rests with the dioceses and parishes rather than with the General Synod.

The Australian Church is sometimes referred to as a federation analogous to the Australian Federation. While there are some similarities, the big difference is that the Australian Constitution gives the Federal Government power to legislate in certain areas.

But the Church's constitution, gives the General Synod no parallel power. The General Synod cannot pass legislation and impose it on a diocese. Any canon passed by the General Synod that affects the order and good government (or the trust property) of the Church within a diocese, must be adopted by the synod of that diocese before it takes effect in that diocese. Nor are resolutions of the General Synod binding on a diocese.

This bottom-up structure is at times bewildering to governments and outside bodies who often expect the General Synod, the Primate or an Archbishop to ensure certain things are done and proper standards met throughout the church or to speak authoritatively for the whole church. This also affects the church's ability to react in a timely way to political or legal situations. This has been borne out again recently in relation to dioceses dealings with financial institutions and by the church's engagement with the Royal Commission on child sexual abuse.

There is suspicion and virtually no prospect of expanding the powers of the General Synod or its Standing Committee. Some saw the whole Constitution Review exercise begun in 1992 as a grab for power by the General Synod and thoroughly resisted it.

This church's membership contributions to Anglican Communion and to various ecumenical bodies are funded by the Special Assessment. The voluntary nature of the Special Assessment means this church sometimes without warning cannot meet its obligations to bodies to which it belongs.

The Standing Committee is a toothless tiger, expensive to run, but can basically only plan and advise. It has very little executive power to act for the church.

3. Composition of the General Synod and the Standing Committee

The shape of church life and ministry has changed and continues to evolve. The complex reality of church life in the 21st century includes non-territorial parishes, parishes that exist only because they are heavily subsidised by Anglicare organisations, the growth and diversity of the Anglicare network itself, super-parishes with ministries both within and beyond their own geographical areas, an extensive and growing network of Anglican schools, cross denominational groups served by Anglican clergy in both rural and urban settings, local ecumenical arrangements, sizeable numbers of reserve and regular Defence Force Chaplains, significant numbers of congregations of migrants and refugees including clergy trained overseas to various levels. Things have changed and go on changing. To what extent is that diversity reflected in the makeup of the General Synod and its Standing Committee?

Does the fact that assistant bishops sit in the General Synod in the house of clergy mean that ordinary clergy are underrepresented?

Is the formula right for calculating how many General Synod representatives a diocese has?

4. The tribunal system

In relation to disciplinary matters, the church's tribunal system mirrors secular criminal procedures. They 'are expensive to operate and can cause pastoral problems' not least because of the multiple roles and expectations of bishops (CSC Issues Paper 1997).

The Appellate Tribunal was thought to be necessary and no one could come up with a viable alternative, but the absence of any real way to enforce compliance with the tribunal's decisions or with the Church's canons presents problems. Failure to abide by the laws and rules of the Church undermines uniformity and puts at risk the Reformation principle that 'clerical domination is to be eschewed and that all laity have rights to worship according to the rules of the church' (CRC Report to General Synod 2001, p.9).

Is the Appellate Tribunal truly impartial when the ruling faction in the General Synod can shore up its own power through Tribunal elections?

5. The rights of minorities

The final shape of the 1962 Constitution emerged in part because minorities in the church thought it protected their position. The Special Bill procedure ensures that time and care are taken to consider the implications of proposed constitutional changes.

The effect, though, is that a majority in the General Synod can have a canon passed which a minority can choose not to adopt at the diocesan level. But the inverse is impossible. A minority in the General Synod can't achieve a change for themselves even though it would not be forced on a majority that didn't want it in their dioceses.

Smaller dioceses have questioned the power of a single metropolitan diocese to veto certain decisions and raised the possibility of whether the requirement shouldn't rather be at least two metropolitan dioceses rather than one.

These five clusters of issues are well understood. In 2001, after 9 years' work, the Constitution Review Commission expressed doubt that the church had the energy for constitution review. Nevertheless, sure that change would be achieved only if there was a high level of agreement around the church, the Commission presented to the 2001 General Synod a conservative draft constitution addressing these issues. The General Synod asked each diocese to consider the draft and report to Standing Committee by June 2003. Not one single diocese responded.

By General Synod 2004 the fears of the Commission had been confirmed and virtually no further work had been done. The Commission was disbanded at its own request and the Church Law Commission asked to take over the work (GS 19/04).

Underlying theological issues

As I say the problems have been well rehearsed, but change seems to be as elusive as it is necessary. What drives these dynamics?

When the Constitution was developed it intentionally entrenched a local power structure. This structure has undoubted strengths. Decisions are made at the local level in response to local needs and priorities, so the church can more authentically reflect its local community. Smaller dioceses are not dictated to or controlled by bigger or richer dioceses. Decisions which might be good for one part of Australia are not forced onto other dioceses where they won't work, aren't relevant or are not wanted.

But this dispersed structure also has undeniable weaknesses. It has meant, for example, that prayer books authorised by the General Synod are not authorised for use in every diocese and that can undermine the practise of common prayer so significant in Anglican heritage. It has meant that some who are canonically ordained in one diocese are not recognised or permitted to minister in other dioceses. It has also meant that decisions taken at General Synod level are often not acted on at diocesan level. Over time increasing diversity has diminished and weakened our internal sense of coherence and belonging together. It has also hindered the way we present ourselves to the wider community and frankly baffled some who observe the Anglican Church from outside. Such bewilderment contributes to lack of understanding, undermines identity and trust and so inhibits effectiveness in mission. We are now reaping the consequences as the wider community holds up a mirror in which we see ourselves.

At virtually every point local autonomy has trumped substantial endeavours to express our belonging together, to act together, to provide mutual accountability and support, to plan and organise mission sensibly and to allocate resources where they are needed. That is, the character of the church as catholic has found only the most muted expression in Australia. Local autonomy has trumped catholicity.

It won't have escaped your observation that the same kinds of issues, writ large, also manifest themselves in the dynamics of the international Anglican Communion. The Churches in the 39 provinces of the world are autonomous, self-governing. There are no central instrumentalities that can compel provinces to comply with decisions or standards made or set outside those provinces. And so, at the international level catholicity struggles with the autonomy of individual member churches and similar sorts of strengths and weaknesses of that arrangement are apparent internationally. The proposed Covenant for the Anglican Communion is an attempt to give expression to catholicity at the international level, without overriding local autonomy. I believe it remains worthy of serious consideration and that many of the fears and criticisms raised are unfounded.

Reflecting on this situation some years ago, Ephraim Radner (2007) argued that local autonomy always seems to trump any notion of catholicity because the local is well defined legally and so is readily asserted. So the Anglican world has allowed political and legal considerations to displace serious thinking about belonging together.

In Radner's view, legal autonomy and juridical independence are stumbling blocks to the theological and scriptural notion of communion. Related to the metaphor of the body, communion requires much more serious thought than has yet occurred. A single member of

the body is never autonomous (Radner, 2007, 3). The body metaphor means the members of the body are necessarily related. It implies the integration of the parts and that all sorts of things are common. Where communion is held as ideal, autonomy cannot be.

Radner (2007, 4, emphasis in original) goes on to insist that ‘communion is a *mission*, and not a static essence or characteristic of the church.’ Communion, he says, is ‘an historical task that must define the shape of our conversion.’ The mission of God is the Father sending the Son to die in love for the world and so to bring reconciliation. And the Son said to the infant church ‘as the Father has sent me, even so I send you’ (John 20.21). So communion is an immensely difficult vocation precisely because it involves dying for one another.

The burdens of the theological and scriptural idea of communion do not fit with the political idea of autonomy. Communion anticipates us bending our wills and giving up our lives for others beyond our local church; autonomy, on the other hand, involves us asserting ourselves over against the other.

We must give much more serious thought to communion, to catholicity, if we are to progress the mission which is our vocation. Unpacking the meaning and significance of communion might just give rise to legal and political possibilities for church life not previously entertained. But underlying this theological task is another one perhaps even more fundamental.

At root a spiritual issue

At root we are dealing with a spiritual issue. Historically the Anglican Church of Australia has been plagued by lack of trust, suspicion and party spirit. The difficulties experienced in securing agreement to our current Constitution in 1961, and the decades it took to do so, indicate that this dynamic has been with us from the outset. And the shape of the Constitution that emerged politically and legally entrenched what was fundamentally a spiritual shortcoming.

When the Constitution Review Commission reported to the 2001 General Synod it noted that

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There is ... at present perhaps a greater fear of each other than has existed for many years. Perhaps it is the case that ‘As we get poorer, we get more frightened; the more frightened we get, the narrower and meaner and bitterer and less secure we are.’ ... [But] ... unless there is an up to date structure, the church’s work cannot go forward. Furthermore, working under a document put together to balance the fears of past generations means that the opportunities for change and advancement are limited and those favouring keeping the status quo are advantaged (Constitution Review Task Force Report to General Synod 2001, Book 4B, p.10).

In 2004 the Commission revealed that one of the reasons it recommended it be disbanded was that ‘In the past three years there has been a significant manifestation of distrust among leaders of the Church. In such a climate it would have been a complete waste of energy, time and money to have pressed on ...’ (Constitution Review Commission Report to General Synod 2004).

My sense is that the quality and tone of relationships has improved somewhat since that observation. Some fruitful discussions have occurred recently. In 2013 the Standing Committee and representatives of the Diocese of Sydney spent several days in conversation, strengthening relationships and exploring issues of mutual concern. Some bridges have been built. Not that I think the presenting problems with which I began, urgent as they are, will be resolved quickly or easily. I don't imagine that in this General Synod we are suddenly going to agree to give the Synod or the Standing Committee significant new powers to require things of dioceses and to impose sanctions on the intransigent.

Nor will the way forward will be found by tinkering with structures alone. Something more fundamental is at stake. Structural change will be possible and effective only when it is accompanied by deeper spiritual transformation – transformed hearts and minds - conversion. The trick will be to attend to the spirit as well as to structures. Reform in the law will not be achieved apart from transformation in relationships.

Progress will come when perceptions are transformed to the point where we recognise the same apostolic faith in the other with whom we differ. Yes we might have been nurtured in traditions with different emphases and expressions, but when we can recognise the other as living out the same apostolic faith in a way different from but not opposed to my own expression, that recognition makes reconciliation possible. That recognition allows us to see each other as gift, to approach each other with gratitude and with the expectation that the other can and will enhance me, rather than with fear because I perceive the other as opposing me and threatening to diminish or harm me in some way.

Such transformations in perceptions emerge only when prolonged, patient listening, happens; when time to understand and value the other takes precedence over tactical manoeuvring to secure the political upper hand. That requires patient engagement rather than polarised combat or hostile non-communication. The question is, are we prepared to invest time and energy in listening and learning to value the other rather than leaping to adversarial win/lose decision-making?

Our recent experience shows that such shifts in tempo and outlook can and do bear fruit. Similar ideas have been pursued elsewhere in the Anglican Communion and relationships which once appeared polarised beyond repair have been transformed in unexpected ways. It seems that, given some space to work, the Holy Spirit can and does.

The design group for this General Synod and the Standing Committee invite you to approach these days in this vein and to invest yourself in this way. Our programme provides for extended discussion in small groups in which understanding and appreciation can grow. Gathered around scripture, anchored in prayer, relying on patience and all the fruit of the Spirit, allowing the possibility that we might recognise in each other, beneath differences, a common faith in Jesus Christ, let's see what God might do with us.

A danger in extending such an invitation is that some will see such an approach as avoiding hard decisions which, to their minds, have clearly evident answers. This approach might be seen as avoiding reality through submersion in process. In the face of that temptation perhaps we might have the courage to answer honestly 'How effective have our past approaches really been?'

We're invited to allow space to meet, for deep encounter, and to put aside, as far as within us lies, anything that might undermine that. Can we for a few days listen and truly hear, deepen understanding of each other around issues we face and the mission we undertake with Christ? Can we resist the temptation to rush to decisions without first deeply hearing everyone's voice, until under the Holy Spirit issues are comprehensively clarified in their various dimensions and nuances?

Can we conceive of the possibility that spiritual transformation, conversion, might give rise to renewed trust and commitment to live and act together and to imagining new organisational arrangements that strengthen our contribution to Christ's mission? And can we conceive that these things could possibly happen in the course of this General Synod?

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