

HAS THE GENERAL SYNOD TURNED THE CORNER?

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It was expected by a number of people and certainly it was anticipated in the media that the General Synod meeting in Brisbane in July this year would turn out to be a highly controversial if not volcanic event. It did not turn out to be so and many of those present now speak of a different kind of Synod and a significant change. So, has the General Synod turned a corner, and if so, which corner, and in what direction might it now be heading?

It is clear that there were a number of important issues considered at the Brisbane meeting of the General Synod. It is also clear that there were significant divisions of opinion and conviction revealed at that Synod. It is also clear that the processes of the Synod had taken a step on from earlier meetings. As one who has been intimately involved in the preparations for this Synod and in shaping the processes of Synod, it is therefore of some interest to me to reflect on what happened and it may be of some interest to readers of St Marks Review to have that interpretation available to them. In order to set such reflection in context it is important to remember the place of the General Synod in the life of Anglicanism in Australia; some of the expectations entertained in regard to the Brisbane meeting; what actually happened at the Brisbane meeting in terms of the issues on the one hand and the processes on the other. What the General Synod points to as happening in Anglicanism in Australia needs to be set in the context of these matters.

The Place of the General Synod

The General Synod was first established in 1872 when a constitution was agreed at a meeting in Sydney of representatives from the twelve existing dioceses. A more formal constitution and the establishment of a legal entity did not occur until 1962 when the

Constitution of The Anglican Church of Australia was agreed to and provided for in enabling legislation in the States and Commonwealth of Australia. A number of Anglican entities and activities are not included within the scope of the synodical structure of either the dioceses or the General Synod. A number of welfare agencies, Anglican schools, missionary societies, publications, have historically not been brought within the scope of the synodical structure. That reflects an important element in the historical tradition of Anglicanism, seen in a previous age in the presence of religious orders, but in more recent centuries in the emergence of what came in the nineteenth century to be called “the society principle”. What the synod structure centrally provides for is an ordered ministry of word and sacrament broadly speaking within the framework of dioceses and parishes within dioceses. The Constitution also has the role of definitively identifying the nature of Anglicanism in Australia. The fundamental declarations in the first three clauses of the Constitution indicate what is unchangeable and the ruling principles in Sections four to six set out what is crucial to the identity of this church..

Section twenty-six [26] of the Constitution sets out the powers of the General Synod, namely to make Canons, Rules and Resolutions in regard to the order and good government of the Church and to make statements as to the faith of the Church, to declare its view on any matter affecting this Church or affecting spiritual, moral and social welfare, and to take such steps as may be necessary or expedient in furtherance of union with other Christian communions. The rest of this chapter of the Constitution is taken up with the mechanisms for making canons and rules. These canons and rules have to do with the order and good government of the church and in particular include consideration of matters to do with ritual, ceremonial and discipline. So, the General Synod has essential powers to make rules about the life of the Church, but it also has related authority to declare its view and to make statements about the faith of this church.

The canons of the General Synod, if they affect anything significant that goes on within a diocese, do not have any effect within that diocese until such time as the General Synod canon is adopted by ordinance of the diocesan synod. In general terms the General

Synod's canons are permissive in character for anything that goes on specifically within the dioceses. That reflects in some sense the role of the General Synod and of the Constitution as the custodian of the inherited faith. It is not surprising therefore that when these matters come to be debated in the General Synod there is a sense that there is quite a lot at stake. These are not peripheral matters, they have to do with central issues. Of course the General Synod can pass canons as to what it might want to do in its own arena, such as how the Standing Committee ought to operate and whether or not there should be this or that group doing some task of national significance to serve the Church community throughout the country and to assist the dioceses in their mission and ministry. In that sense the General Synod is clearly not an add-on, but is essentially part of the Church. In his Presidential Address in Brisbane the Primate made the point that a lot is at stake in the way in which we conduct ourselves at a General Synod. It is not so much that we might be united in order that people "might believe, but that there is a God but what our God is really like." If we are brought into being as a church by a God of trinitarian community then the way we relate is crucially significant.

The history of the debates in the General Synod shows that it has not been an easy arena in which to sustain such a sense of united belonging. There have been significant conflicts and those conflicts have often expressed themselves in hostile terms. In the debates about the Ordination of Women in 1992, at the two meetings of the General Synod deep convictions on both sides of the argument were at stake and serious conflict and hostility was manifest at the meetings of the Synod. Correspondence between some of those involved in that hostility and about the conduct of people at the Synod was still continuing two years after the Synod.

Expectations of Brisbane

On the last day of the Adelaide Synod in 1998 there was a debate upon issues of sexuality in relation to the so-called Kuala Lumpur statement. It was said with some heat in that debate that while the Adelaide Synod had been quiet and friendly, in no small measure

due to changed processes introduced to the Synod, at the next Synod we would be facing issues of real substance which had to do with gospel priorities upon which there could be no compromise. Sexuality and Women Bishops were to be the controversial issues on the agenda at the Brisbane Synod. The Adelaide Synod asked for a statement on sexuality for Australia and for legislation to provide for Women Bishops. Expectations in regard to the Brisbane Synod were accentuated by the election of Peter Carnley, the Archbishop of Perth, as the Primate and by the election of Peter Jensen as the Archbishop of Sydney. Here were two strong leaders representing clearly different emphases and who had been engaged in some public disputes in the eighteen months prior to the Brisbane Synod. So, Brisbane was said to be a Synod where there would be a volcanic eruption because of controversial issues and controversial people.

Brisbane – The Issues

The issues of Women Bishops and Sexuality did indeed come on to the agenda at the Brisbane Synod. There was a bill to provide for the ordination of women as bishops with certain protocols which would provide for those who conscientiously objected to such a step. There was also a set of essays on sexuality which had been prepared by the Doctrine Panel and which contained differences of opinion, and was being brought to the Synod to be commended to the Church for wider study. So, the issue of sexuality really was in part deflected because the motion before the Synod was not one which would require a vote to approve a particular point of view. That motion was simply taking the Adelaide debate on sexuality one small step further and inviting wider debate on the question in the church.

In the case of Women Bishops, the debate proceeded past the first stage so that the bill in principle was agreed to by a 58 per cent majority. However, the debate bogged down in the detailed discussion of the protocols and the text of the bill. Essentially what happened was that people were asking for different kinds of things from the protocols and it became clear that these were going to be fought over tooth and nail in detail. In this context the promoters of the bill sought leave of Synod to introduce a motion which

would defer consideration of the matter until the next Synod in 2004, and put in train a process of continuing negotiation and consultation in the meantime. Some people felt that it would have been better to have taken the matter to a vote so that it would then be clear that this matter did not, or perhaps did, command enough support to get through the two-thirds majority required to pass such a canon. Such a canon of course would only be permissive and dioceses would not necessarily adopt it. If that had happened, then the matter would be left entirely off the agenda in any formal sense and the supporters and opponents of the provision of Women Bishops would have been left to take their own initiatives in promoting their cause. The result of the decision taken by the Synod is that that debate is kept publicly up on the agenda within the framework of the General Synod structure, so that the Standing Committee is responsible for promoting continuing debate about this matter. In other words, the motion takes a step back from the proposal before the Synod and declares that we have to keep this matter on the table as a matter of ongoing discussion between ourselves officially. That means that there is significant restraint upon anyone doing anything unilaterally because this matter is formally on The General Synod's agenda and in process. In this connection it was interesting that on the last day of the Synod in Brisbane it was widely reported that at a meeting of the diocesan bishops the previous evening, there was clear and general support that no independent action should be taken outside of any decision making process by the General Synod.

The General Synod of course considered many other things and the full list of them can be consulted in the Proceedings when they are published or on the General Synod web site which has been established by the General Synod Office at www.anglican.org.au/generalsynod2001 . In seeking to identify the direction in which the Synod was pointing, one might draw attention to the change of status of the Diocese of the Northern Territory from a missionary diocese to a full diocese; the support for a new canon for the Anglican Board of Mission Australia which will enable them to develop more effective decision making and activity as a national body, the provision of a more effective way of appointing and consecrating a person to be Bishop to the Australian Defence Force, a canon to provide for a Liturgy Publishing Trust, and a series of resolutions concerned with Indigenous matters. These decisions all indicate that the

idea of activity at the national level has not been diminished in the priorities of the General Synod. The presentation from ABM indicated growth and change. While the Synod rejected the idea of special places on the General Synod for Defence Force Chaplains and the Defence Force Bishop, it provided for much more effective support for the work of the Bishop to the Defence Force, and no doubt in due course there will be greater profile and recognition of this area of activity.

Two other issues were of interest in terms of the direction of Australian Anglicanism as signalled by the Brisbane Synod. The first was the review of the Strategic Issues and Other Bodies Canon. This canon, passed in 1998, abolished all the standing commissions and committed the General Synod and the Standing Committee to a policy of strategic activity and mission orientation, was amended to remove the Strategic Issues Advisory Panel [SIAP]. This had been a type of think-tank established under the previous canon to advise the Standing Committee on things that it should be doing in this mission orientated strategic direction. It was said that the SIAP model had failed and that it had to be changed. Whether or not it did fail in any reasonable sense is still a matter of dispute. The report which was prepared for Standing Committee on the canon indicated that it was not only SIAP that failed, if it did, but that more importantly it was Standing Committee which had failed, both to appreciate the details and to support the activities asked for by the General Synod under the 1998 canon.

The amendment passed in Brisbane makes the Standing Committee responsible for the strategic thinking at the General Synod level. SIAP has been deleted from the canon and its role effectively passed to the Standing Committee. Some in the debate said that given the failure of the Standing Committee to respond to the previous canon, and the failure of the Standing Committee to produce a report requested by the 1998 General Synod for a review of its own activities and functions, did not give much confidence that the Standing Committee had the capacity or the will to carry out effectively what was being asked of it in the amended canon. However, the Synod clearly voted for the amendment and the Standing Committee will now have to address quite directly that task and the implications of the amended canon for its own processes. There is every indication that despite the

fact that there was not much change in the membership of the Standing Committee that the Standing Committee is clearly going to address this role and the implied changes with vigour and determination.

The point to which I would like to draw attention here however, is that the basic direction set by the 1998 canon of mission and outward orientation and of a strategic approach rather than a simply reactive approach was not challenged by anyone in the debate, indeed it was endorsed strongly by the General Synod in Brisbane. That indicates that while the mechanism of the 1998 canon might have been modified, the general and fundamental thrust of the canon to press the Standing Committee and the General Synod structures to be strategic in their activities and mission and outward orientated in their commitments remains the requirement of the General Synod.

What the Brisbane Synod therefore seems to have indicated is that while there may be disagreement about the actual way in which we approach these matters there is emphatic endorsement for the notion that Anglicanism has to be a mission orientated faith in Australia today and that at the national level it has to act strategically rather than reactively. This certainly seems to suggest some kind of change in direction, a turning of a corner, begun in Adelaide now strongly endorsed at Brisbane.

The second matter which is interesting in this respect is the debate on the review of the Constitution. A draft constitution was presented to the Synod and there was an energetic debate about whether or not the Synod should proceed with consideration of a new Constitution. In the course of the debate and in the discussion groups it became clear that the Synod members wanted to continue to address the issue of a new constitution. One of the reasons for this was a sense that the present constitution inhibited our capacity to deal with certain questions which are now before us – the ordination of Women as Bishops, the admission of Defence Force Chaplains and the Defence Force Bishop to the membership of the General Synod. The monopoly of a particular diocese for what went on within the territory of that diocese became a question which some wanted to explore. In other words it was presented that the constitution is actually the obstacle to making

progress on these questions. It was also asserted that Canon Law and also the constitution was an expression of a theology of the church, an ecclesiology. As a consequence therefore, if unity is to be achieved then it may need to be a unity which reconfigured the description of that ecclesiology.

Another view of the situation was that it would be impossible in our present heightened sense of disagreement to renegotiate a constitution upon which we could all agree. It was therefore better to leave the Constitution alone. Clearly the Synod did not want to follow this course and clearly by implication there was a sense in which the Synod was prepared to look at quite a differently configured conception of the Anglican Church of Australia as expressed in the Constitution and Canons. The result of this is that the Standing Committee will be asked to promote discussion in the Church about the draft constitution and presumably they will do so in the light of some debate about the nature of an ecclesiology of Australian Anglicanism. It will be interesting to see how the logic of that exercise is related to the operation of the new Strategic Issues canon and the commitment of the Synod to thinking strategically and in mission terms.

These issues in their various ways indicate that the Synod is moving in a direction of wanting to see things done at a national level, to see those things done strategically and in mission terms and done in a way which is clearly aware of the more openly discussed divisions of conviction and opinion in Australian Anglicanism.

The Process

However it is in the area of process that Brisbane most clearly signalled a turning of a corner. There are five aspects of process which seem to me to be relevant; worship, conflict resolution procedures, inauguration of the “huddles” in relation to amendments, the role of visitors and new members, and the contribution of the members of the Synod and some particular individuals.

Worship

The worship for this Synod extended the developments which had taken place in Adelaide. At the Melbourne Synod the worship of the Synod members was in the school chapel which was separately located from the Synod hall. There was therefore a location and timetable separation of the worship from the debates and discussions in the Synod hall. In Adelaide that changed in several respects. First the daily worship was incorporated within the daily timetable of the Synod in the Synod Hall. Second, the daily worship in the morning incorporated the use of small group discussion as part of the Bible studies. These were the same small groups which were used later in the day to discuss contentious issues on the agenda of the Synod. As in Melbourne the Synod began with a Synod service and this pattern was continued in Brisbane with the additional element that the daily morning and evening services followed the pattern of morning and evening prayer. There was more hymn singing and as a consequence the actual effect, though not I think the planned effect, was that the amount of time available for small group discussion was diminished compared with what was available in Adelaide.

Conflict Resolution Processes

Following the Melbourne Synod in 1995 investigations were made of the Conflict Resolution Network. On the basis of these principles synod processes were devised to enable conflicts to be addressed in a way that minimized communication problems and the real issues of difference to be brought out in ways which were respectful, courteous and creative.

Those processes were set in place at the Adelaide Synod. They involved the introduction of Protocols for participation by members of Synod and were almost universally observed. Contentious issues were introduced by lead speakers who spoke from different perspectives or points of view. This was followed by questions of elucidation, and then small group discussions. These small groups were made up of people from different dioceses and the same groups were used for the morning worship which had been integrated into the structure of the Synod programme.

In the 1998 Synod there was some confusion as to the outcomes expected from the small group process. At the most recent Synod, the group discussion processes were further developed so that there was a clearer understanding of how the discussions related to the stage the matter had reached in the life of the General Synod. This was set out in the preliminary material. As a result there was a greater sense that some matters had to be taken in stages over a number of synods.

“Huddles”

The huddles at Brisbane were made possible by the introduction of an amendments sheet. This gave prior notice of amendments to Bills and resolutions. The Chair of committees then encouraged those involved to huddle and see if it were possible to work out some way forward to put to the synod. This brought out into the open what often had taken place anyway in the corridors of the General Synod. The “huddles” provided an informal but publicly acknowledged way of dealing with matters on which there was some significant disagreement. In many cases those disagreements could be talked through and a resolution brought to the Synod.

New Members and Visitors

This General Synod in Brisbane was marked by a significant contribution by a number of visitors, two in particular stand out for the impact they made on the character of the Synod. First was the National Director of ABM who spoke about the work of ABM and about the mission of the Church. It was an address of considerable optimism and commitment and reminded the Synod members of their commitment as Anglican Christians to outreach and mission. It also showed that things were turning around for the ABM and that it was very important therefore to allow them to have a slimmed down organisational pattern to enable them to be more effective in promoting this new growth which was emerging in mission awareness and activity.

The second visitor to note in this context was the Minister for Immigration and Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Philip Ruddock. Mr Ruddock is a committed Anglican and he spoke with clarity and firmness for the Government's position on immigration and refugees. In the event he did not persuade the Synod which passed a resolution calling on the Government to do a number of things which the Government was not particularly disposed to do. Nonetheless, the extent and quality of his presentation and the clarity of the information which he provided contributed to a sense in the Synod that it was possible to conduct an argument with such a senior representative of the Federal Government on an issue where it was likely the Synod would disagree, and yet to do so in a way which was manifestly respectful and courteous. These two visitors in my view significantly contributed to the character of this Synod and its processes.

This Synod had Indigenous members present for the first time under the constitutional changes introduced in Adelaide. At certain points they intervened quite strongly in the debate and brought to bear their own cultural habits and style. This was certainly not the style of the formal adherence to Standing Orders but a much more relaxed and direct expression of opinion. This was particularly so when the Indigenous members joined in promoting in the Synod a motion of appreciation and farewell to Bishop Arthur Malcolm. To have that different culture so present had an effect on the processes of the Synod.

Particular Individuals

For the 1998 Synod, members were provided with some protocols as to the appropriate way to participate in debate according to principles of conflict resolution. Members of the Synod clearly took notice of these protocols and in my opinion only five contributions to the Adelaide Synod could have been regarded as breaching the protocols. I do not think that I can recall any contribution to the Synod in Brisbane which could be regarded as being in breach of these protocols. There were certainly vigorous contributions and one or two quite fiery contributions, but they did not go beyond the protocols set out in the preliminary literature. Furthermore, I think that the atmosphere of the debate made it possible for people to argue more directly the theological issues before the Synod with a higher level of candour and effectiveness.

However, before the Synod it was widely anticipated that the Synod would provide an environment in which the public debate between the Primate, Archbishop Peter Carnley, and representatives from the diocese of Sydney and in particular the new Archbishop Peter Jensen might ignite. In fact, Archbishop Jensen participated in the debate on only a small number of occasions, and when he did, while making his point clear, he did so in what could only be described as a statesmanlike fashion. Peter Carnley presided over the Synod with grace and humour and a very considerable degree of tolerance of people being given time to argue their point. Far from the Synod being an arena in which this east-west conflict might erupt, the participation of these leaders made a significant contribution to the tenor of the debate in the Synod. It was interesting to notice that a motion had been put on the business paper before the Synod requesting the Primate when exercising his office in public discussions “to indicate respect for traditional convictions that differ from his own but are consistent with the fundamental declarations of the constitution”. Clearly that motion represented some of the expectations about the Synod, but the reality was that as the Synod proceeded the whole atmosphere changed and in fact the motion was withdrawn from the business paper by the mover.

So, has the General Synod turned a corner?

I believe that the answer to that question is quite clearly yes for the following reasons:

- There is a clear awareness of the importance of conflict resolution processes in the way in which the Synod conducts its business. The moves in this direction begun from 1996 onwards have clearly been extremely successful.
- The Synod has come to see that some important questions need to be taken in stages. That has been clarified in the discussion group processes of this Synod and greatly assisted in the way in which in the end the Women Bishops, Constitution Review and Sexuality Issues were handled. Of course, it could be said no-one is going to change their minds on these matters and that we are simply, by postponing them or sustaining some process of conversation, deferring the inevitable. I think this point of view is too sceptical. It is really quite important within the framework of agreed commitment

to Anglican doctrine and practice that where we have significant differences of conviction and opinion that we continue the conversation.

- That the real differences are now beginning to emerge more clearly is one of the consequences of the operation of conflict resolution principles. Where hostility gives way to reasoned conflict then the issues at stake in the conflict can be more candidly and generously presented. The developing processes of the General Synod are facilitating this change.
- A number of other process procedures in the Synod such as the institutionalising of the “huddles” on contentious amendments to bills and resolutions, have also facilitated the business of the Synod so that less time is taken up with point scoring and procedural debate and more time is able to be given to real differences of opinion.
- Clearly face to face conversation within this framework promotes and produces more open and courteous interactions.
- The Synod has clearly moved in the direction begun in 1998 in Adelaide but now confirmed as being strategic in its work at the national level and being committed in that strategic activity to mission and outreach.

There is one final point on which I would like to comment. During the course of the Synod the image of the church being made up of two groups which are like tectonic plates moving apart was referred to on a number of occasions. It is not unlike the comment made in a previous generation by Donald Robinson that we have two churches in the one denomination. The tectonic plate image was used to describe the way in which people who adopt what tends to be a more literal and immediate appeal to the Bible differ from those who do not; between those who see the focus of Christian spirituality in sacramental terms, though not necessarily highly ritualistic terms, and those who see it in terms of the propositions of Christian truth from scripture. Those two different points of view tend to come to the fore in relation to the ordination of women and issues of sexuality. On the one hand there is the claim that the Bible teaches male headship as a moral principle and that moral principle should be applied to the order of ministry and therefore women ought not to be ordained to any position which implies a contravention of that headship principle. In relation to the sexuality issues the Bible it is said teaches

clearly a point of view about homosexuality and the church, being subject to scripture, ought not to allow for the recognition in any way of homosexual practices. On the other side of this so called tectonic divide are those who see that God genuinely does call women to positions of ordained ministry and that the headship principle is not really clear in any appropriately interpreted sense of scripture, and that in relation to sexuality the teaching of scripture is not entirely clear and that the categories in this debate are quite different from those which apply in the Bible. As a consequence, what the Bible says ought to be interpreted in the light of the different cultural and conceptual categories with which we approach this question in the twenty-first century.

The divisions which Donald Robinson saw as splitting the church were matters of churchmanship. They had to do with whether episcopacy was an absolute and the kind of ritualistic revival at the beginning of the twentieth century which was seen in Australia as unacceptable in a church which was committed to the reformation settlements. Of course, those churchmanship issues are not now as intensely felt. The Anglo-Catholicism of the middle of the twentieth century has moderated significantly. One only has to think of the character of the churchmanship and the practices and liturgical styles that prevailed fifty years ago in dioceses like Brisbane, North Queensland and Adelaide and compare them with the attitudes and practices which prevail in those dioceses now to recognise that there has been a very significant moderation. Similarly, the churchmanship practices and styles in the diocese of Sydney have also moved with the passing of time. In the mid twentieth century evangelicals in Sydney would never have thought of dispensing with robes or not following the Book of Common Prayer in the public services of the Church. In one sense we have all moved towards the more informal and become less attached to particular points of style. These changes reflect the influence of trends in the wider community towards greater informality.

The image of the tectonic plates resonates in large measure because it draws on moves in Australian society to the local, the parochial and the personal. The image of the tectonic plates is really just today's image and will prove to be as passing as the two churches in the one denomination image. But the question surely arises as to whether either of these

models is either helpful, or an adequate expression of what is actually going on in Australian Anglicanism.

In a previous generation the two churches in one denomination image was designed to draw attention to what was then regarded as being matters of fundamental difference of conviction which divided people within Australian Anglicanism. These regional divisions are very old. Those felt to exist between Bishop Perry and his episcopal colleagues in the middle of the nineteenth century would be of a similar order. Some of the correspondence between Perry and Broughton is stiff and distant and reflects real independence on the part of Perry from Broughton who was ostensibly his Metropolitan. The reactions of people in Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney to the 1850 Bishops' Conference showed not just lay / episcopal difficulties, but also an instinct strongly present amongst lay people not to have people outside their colony interfering with what was going on within their colony, or in this case, in their diocese. In other words, my point is that these kinds of divisions are in fact perennial, or if you take a more pessimistic view of institutional Christianity you could say they are endemic. Either way, it seems to me that to portray the divisions as being especially significant and peculiarly and uniquely fundamental in this generation as compared with previous generations is not historically satisfactory. That is not to say that the present divisions are not significant. Nor is it to say that they do not touch quite important and crucial questions. But it is to say that the divisions which currently exist within Australian Anglicanism ought not to be regarded as having too apocalyptic a significance.

Furthermore, given that these kinds of divisions are likely to be present on a regular basis and from time to time more or less fundamentally significant or crucial, then the issue of how the conversation within Australian Anglicanism is conducted becomes much more important. It is in that sense therefore that the Brisbane Synod and the success of the conflict resolution principles which have been introduced into the Synod in the last five years take on a much more considerable significance. By the various means which have been referred to in this article, I believe the General Synod has indeed turned a corner in the adoption of processes and the manner of its discussion thus enables the real

differences more easily and fruitfully to be brought to the surface. When that debate can be conducted with reasonable good humour and courtesy within a framework of worship and commitment to the faith contained in the constitution, then not only can it be said that the General Synod has turned a corner, but that it has turned a very significant corner which in some respects is more important than any of the particular topics debated at the Synod. That in turn points to an important issue of ecclesiology, namely that unity in the church has to do not only with agreement about certain propositions, but also, and in some senses more importantly, with how we relate to each other in the midst of our differences on some topics under the common headship of the crucified Christ.