



PASTORAL LETTER TO THE CLERGY FROM THE BISHOP OF NEWCASTLE

9 August 2021

Dear sisters and brothers,

Through my pastoral contact with you and as a result of some correspondence, I thought it was timely to write about our continued experience of being a church in which there are strong and opposing views on the blessing of people who have been civilly married and who are of the same gender.

You will be aware that it is my deep desire that we find a shared way as a diocese in which we continue to engage in the important work of proclaiming the gospel and engaging in practical mission despite of, but also enriched by, our engagement with difference. We engaged with this at the Synod in March. We know that there is immense goodwill between clergy and people in our Diocese which is revealed in so many ways. At times the tension is palpable, at other times our purpose for gathering and our conversation has a different focus. Sometimes it is simply to be together to encourage one another in difficult time.

As we explore this shared way, we are mindful that throughout the history of the church there have been moments when individuals decide that they cannot remain in fellowship with other church members. With deep grief and after considerable prayer, they take a stand based on their conscience. The scriptures and history of the early church witness to both disagreements of this kind and to the path for their resolution. We know that some disputes remain unresolved in our lifetimes.

Four decades ago Australian Anglicans debated the marriage of people who had been divorced. This was a significant engagement around embodiment, scriptural teaching, pastoral care, and related issues. Many Australian Anglican clergy now would, on balance, officiate at the wedding of a person who has previously been divorced.

Three decades ago, Australian Anglicans wrestled with their understanding of the role of women in leadership, preaching and sacramental ministries. This was a season of significant tension as the General Synod, the Appellate Tribunal, Diocesan Synods, and parishes engaged in theological, scriptural and pastoral debate. Some people left the Anglican Church of Australia at that time. Their actions included starting new churches.

In our time, we are contemplating the right way for this Church to respond to people who know themselves to be lesbian or gay and who seek a blessing on their relationship within the context of a liturgical service. Alongside this, we have wanted to explore how we respond to members of the clergy who identify as lesbian or gay and who understand themselves to be called to a form of intimate relationship. The Appellate Tribunal has answered some of the questions emerging in this Church; doing so within the Constitutional limitations that guide its work. The other and various arms of decision-making in this Church will engage in ongoing deliberation.

As this goes on, there are some members of this Church, who have significant conscience questions. Some are looking to the Uniting Church which they see as having a more inclusive stance while others are looking at the Catholic and Presbyterian Churches which they see as having a more traditional stance. Some are open to the proposal from GAFCON which suggests that an Anglican identity can be maintained but this will be as a separate organisation which is not part of the Anglican Church of Australia.

With a great deal of care, Anglicans in this Diocese have been thoughtful in seeking to maintain respectful dialogue with people with whom they disagree. We are seeking as a Diocese to identify a shared way in which people with divergent views can be engaged in Christ's mission together. This is, without doubt, a demanding way.



Clergy and lay representatives to the Synod will be aware that my view, formed after wide engagement with others, is that, despite some commentary to the opposite, the legal and pastoral fact is that a member of the clergy of this Diocese, at this time, is not prohibited from using the 'Wangaratta service' or a similar service. No member of the clergy is required to use it. The Appellate Tribunal has ruled that the use of the 'Wangaratta service' would not be inconsistent with the Fundamental Declarations or the Ruling Principles, provided that use is in a diocese in which the *Canon Concerning Services 1992* is in force and the service is not contrary to any regulation of the Synod of that diocese. Accordingly, I understand from my wide engagement with others, that it would be unlawful for me to seek to direct a member of the clergy not to exercise this ministry if they choose to do so.

You observe closely that I, like all clergy and all officers of the Diocese, are bound by the canons and ordinances in force in the Diocese. That is our Anglican way. It is up to our Synod, or the Diocesan Council as its delegate (when it has the proper authority), to change ordinances or change which canons are in force. I know that some people lament that Synod is the forum for this work but in our Anglican way, it is the forum that is created to exercise these exact responsibilities. My responsibility as the Bishop of the Diocese is to attend carefully to such deliberations and form my own, and independent, mind.

In relation to all variations in authorised services and all forms of services for which there is no provision in our prayer books, where questions are referred to me, in accordance with the *Canon Concerning Services 1992*, about their reverence, edifying form, and doctrine, I will continue to exercise the responsibility to determine those questions. That is the lawful requirement of me and one which I take very seriously.

In my view, it is unlikely that continued theological debate will result in any quick change to people's perspectives. However, we should continue to read, reflect, pray, and engage as we search for the truth which God is seeking to reveal to us. This quest is fashioned by our regular engagement with word and sacrament as the church gathers week by week.

There are two great resources for helping people survey the breadth of thinking on the topic of human sexuality from an Anglican perspective. I commend them again to you:

- [Anglican Church of Australia] <https://anglican.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/Marriage-Doctrine-Essays-Final.pdf>
- [Church of England] [LLF Web Version Full Final.pdf \(churchofengland.org\)](https://www.churchofengland.org/llf-web-version-full-final.pdf)

At the Diocesan Leaders Conference, in a few weeks time, the clergy will be engaging in the program developed by the Archbishop of Canterbury's Reconciling Leaders Network called *Difference* which promotes three habits –

Be curious
Listen to others' stories and see the world through their eyes.
Seek to value and understand the other and explore the limits of our own stories.
| Every person is made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27).

Be present
Encounter others with authenticity and confidence.
Build trust with others by engaging our whole selves in honesty, humility and vulnerability.
| Our encounters with others are inseparable from our relationship with Jesus (Matthew 25:31–46). Our fracture and mess can be holy ground where God is at work (2 Corinthians 12:9–11).

Reimagine
Find hope and opportunity in the places where we long to see change.
Offer everything back to God, and allow him to lead us into forgiveness, courage and creativity.
| God is making all things new (Revelation 21:5). We are new creations (2 Corinthians 5:16).



These are critical habits for our church in the vast array of missional engagements to which we are called.

Many of you will be familiar with the Anglican doctrine of reception. It was put before the Anglican Communion again in 1988, prior to the Lambeth Conference, as the church deliberated on the ministry of women and the episcopate. The 'Grindrod Report' made the following observations –

Beyond the official responses ... lies a continuing process of reception by the Church. Moreover, in this process what is affirmed in words has to be embodied in the life of the Church if reception is to be credible.

'Reception' is a long and spiritual process involving both official responses by the synods and councils of the Church 'at the highest level of authority'. It also involves a longer and more widespread process of reception. Conciliar or synodical decisions, themselves emerging from widespread consultation and episcopal guidance, have to be received. If in the course of time the Church as a whole receives a synodical decision this would be an additional or final sign that it may be judged to be in accordance with God's will for the Church. The people of God, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, have to be involved in forming the mind of the Church in matters affecting the faith of the Church. Within this process, the authority of those exercising leadership, individually, and corporately, is not a formal or imposed one. It is an authority supported and accepted by the involvement of the whole fellowship.

Whenever a matter is tested by the Church there is necessarily an openness about the question. The continuing communion of Christians with one another in faith and worship maintains the underlying unity of the Church while the reception process is at work. The openness needs to be recognised and accepted by those on both sides of the debate. There needs to be openness to the possibility of the new thing being accepted by the Church or rejected by the Church. It also entails a willingness to live with diversity throughout the 'reception' process. 'Reception is a long range and far-reaching process in which the whole Church seeks to recognise and affirm confidently the one faith ... and confidently to lay hold of the new which that faith promises' (WCC). The reception process cannot be hurried: it demands patience and listening by both sides and calls for generosity of spirit. Sensitivity and mutual caring is even more called for when what is in question is matters of faith embodied in the ministry of women and men. The ideal of unity and the quest for truth may both be pursued and upheld as the process of reception is worked out.

I think it is prudent as we order our life together to make a pastoral statement and make two pastoral requests.

Statement – The law of this church in the Diocese provides that no minister is obliged to officiate at services other than those which are in the authorised prayer books of this church. Consequently, it is lawful for any minister of this church to decline to lead a service of blessing for persons of the same gender who have been married according to the Marriage Act.

Request – It is my request to clergy that should they seek to lead a service of blessing for persons of the same gender who have been married according to the Marriage Act within a church building within a Parish that they ascertain, well prior to the service, that the Incumbent and Parish Council of the Parish have confirmed by resolution recorded in the Minutes of the Parish that they are willing for the church building to be used for that ministry.

Request – It is my request that any member of the clergy seeking to exercise this ministry have a pastoral conversation with me about doing so prior to each occasion they may exercise this ministry.

Friends, may we be strong in our common bond of faith as devoted ourselves to Christ's mission and pray that his kingdom will come. As with disciples since the resurrection we have great confidence knowing that because of God's great love and mercy for us, we have been made alive with Christ even when we were dead because of our human nature. By grace we have been saved.



Please share this letter with your parish council and parishioners (for parish clergy), and with others who have a great stake in the work that we do.

With every blessing,

Peter, Newcastle

**The Rt Rev Dr Peter Stuart
Bishop of Newcastle**