

**REFLECTION GIVEN BY BISHOP PETER STUART
TO THE CLERGY OF THE MAITLAND DEANERY
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ST PETERS EAST MAITLAND**

Twenty five years ago I entered Trinity College in Melbourne to begin my formal theological training. Much has changed in our church in those 25 years.

When I started at Trinity College in Melbourne there were two other students from Tasmania. During my time in College Tasmania also had students in Morpeth, Ridley and St Barnabas in Adelaide. A rural Victorian Diocese had four students in Trinity. Twenty-five years later, those two Dioceses have very few stipendiary candidates.

When I was in College there were 68 parishes in the Diocese of Newcastle, admittedly some of these were struggling. There was an average of 8710 acts of communion each week. In 2010, there were 62 parishes and an average of 6555 acts of communion each week. We are a church that has been declining by about 1% each year. We have been in decline for some considerable time.

The situation is even more poignant in this Deanery. In 1988 there was an average of 1191 acts of communion each week. In 2010 this had declined to 802. This is an average decline of 1.4%. Only the Parish of Telerah/Rutherford recorded more acts of communion in 2010 than it did in 1988. This is all in the context of a Deanery that grew by 10,000 people in the five years from 2001 – 2006 and has probably grown faster in the in the five years from 2006 – 2011.

At the heart of the theological training I received at Trinity was the message that ministry involved continuing faithfully the ministry practice we had inherited. Our task was to preach well, care well, express warmth in the occasional offices, offer dignified worship and to pray. The training was based in the presumption that people would keep coming to the church as they had done in the past. The Anglican Church was understood to be part of the respected social fabric. I understand that the training at Morpeth in this period was very similar.

There were a number of clergy on returning to Tasmania to serve in the ordained ministry who recognised the great contribution of holy men and women to supporting parish ministry in children's clubs, serving, music, leadership and the like but who also recognised that trying to uphold the existing ministry models was going to be difficult. The fact was that the Diocese had many of its physical resources located according to agrarian aspirations of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Ministry was often reserved to clergy alone and sacramental ministry was determined by the capacity to pay.

In the period 1994 – 2001, the Diocese of Tasmania embarked upon three major reform initiatives.

1. There was a carefully considered effort to reduce the number of church buildings around the Diocese. There were no significant new growth areas in the state but there were a number of centres where the population had declined with the movement away from a rural economy.
2. Significant steps were taken to introduce a form of what is now described as Ministering Communities in Mission with a commitment to align people's ministries with the gifts God has given them, to promote collaborative ministry by the creation of ministry teams, and to enable liturgical and sacramental ministries in communities which had previously struggled to meet the cost of a stipend.
3. Governance which promoted much greater local creativity and adaptation.

These strategies probably stemmed the rate of decline in some places and enabled ministry to continue where under previous models ministry would have been withdrawn.

In 2001, I moved to the Diocese of Adelaide which was grappling with the issues facing the church in a different way, shaped, in part, by their experience as a largely urban Diocese. In my time in Adelaide there were four main strategies

1. The Diocese committed itself to a stipendiary clergy model but encouraged groupings of parishes which could afford stipendiary ministry. A number of cooperative arrangements were put into place.
2. Clergy education focussed on leadership. In a radically revised program where education in mission was central and we sought to prepare people for the practice of ministry in a changing world.
3. There were a number of experiments in Fresh or Alternative expressions with a variety of new services of worship started often focussed on families.
4. Church planting initiatives were often under discussion because of the commitment to developing new congregations by the largest Anglican evangelical congregation.

The cooperative arrangements provided some stability. Many of the clergy show creativity and adaptability amidst change and challenge. Some of the Fresh expressions were positive though often either small in attendance or seasonal – that is lasting for a period to be replaced by another alternative. The Holy Trinity Church plants were established and grew.

I reflect on these experiences because they were all parts of my ministry and like you I need to draw on what I have learnt together with my reading in contemporary ideas to contribute to discussions about the future. Sadly we don't have a roadmap. We have to create one together.

We currently have one church building for around every 8300 people, many of which are heritage buildings. We have about 1 stipendiary member of clergy for every 13000 people or 1 for around every 80 Sunday worshippers. We know that we are struggling to sustain this level of stipendiary ministry and resort to significant fund raising to do so.

As I look into the future I gain comfort from writers who affirm that Australian's remain a spiritually searching people who are open to existential ideas and finding meaning but I am challenged by the same writers who indicate that fewer people will explore their spirituality through traditional Christian practices.

I am confident that incarnational, grace-filled, sacramental, life embracing expressions of Christianity resonate with this spiritual searching. Leaders with priestly imagination who draw on the breadth of Anglican tradition will be able to assist people to encounter and respond to the living God.

As a bishop I want to ensure that those who have left other professions to serve in the full-time ministry are provided the opportunity to fulfil that calling with imagination and wholehearted commitment. There is a matter of deep relationship here which needs to be honoured. At the same time I see that much of our future leadership will need to be partially or fully self-supporting.

Place is central to an Anglican way of expressing Christianity. We will continue to need beautiful buildings which assist the work of proclamation and provide sacred space in busy communities. Yet these buildings will increasingly face the rigour applied to other public buildings through safety laws.

The church in Australia has relied on the financial support of committed members and fellow travelers for its current ministry structure. With the changes in Australian patterns of spirituality and religion this is less sustainable now and will be in the future. The normal pattern of Anglican congregations is to gather in family sized or pastoral sized congregations. These parishes are viable in terms of community but struggle financially. They can undertake one or two aspects of mission but are unable to minister to newcomers across the whole span of life.

The huge task in front of us is to discern the right balance in people and physical resources in order that we can be effective agents of the gospel. I am really encouraged by the explorations going on in this Deanery to respond to this challenge. Explorations which are prepared to move against a culture that often requires us to have a very high level of attention to our own patch. Our culture can lead us to address local issues before we address regional issues. Yet, the risk is that the whole house of cards may come down at once.

I recognise with you the weight of the task of Christian ministry and I acknowledge that there are times when the task comes with burden and grief. It is a demanding vocation. Our vocation is to exercise prayerful, imaginative leadership. The household of deacons and the college of priests must exercise a catholic (that is wide reaching) and strategic approach to the issues facing otherwise much of what we believe is central in being the community, servants and messengers of the kingdom of God will be lost. I am continually moved by what people are doing because of their commitment to Christ and his Church. However, with at least a fifty year perspective on what we are called to be and do it is vital that in our generation of ministry we take up the challenge.

Bishop Brian commented recently that he was sure Jeremiah might have preferred Abraham's ministry! It falls to us to respond to God in the context of our time and place as they, and many others, did. In the face of this calling we are not abandoned or left desolate (See the Counsellor or comforter in John 14, 15, & 16 and Matthew 28:20). This assurance is at the prayerful heart of our ministry. At the ordination of a deacon, priest and bishop under the APBA Ordinal the presiding bishop says to the candidates, after they have made their promises, *May God who has given you the will to do these things give you the grace and power to perform them* (APBA p 787, 795, 804).