

FIRST Session of the Fifty-Fifth SYNOD 2026

Saturday 27 June 2026

Address from the President Rt Rev Dr Peter Stuart

14th Bishop of Newcastle



*****Synod Sermon***

I remember the day that I decided to stay on my early journey as a disciple of Jesus.

The previous evening two members of the youth fellowship had come to “speak the truth in love” to me. They were leaving the congregation. They stressed to me that the real believers were leaving with them. At the time, I had embraced the Christian faith openly for less than a year. They wanted me to be caught up in their theological debate. For me, it was a shattering experience.

The following morning, I spent some time with the Associate Priest of the parish. I was moments away from chucking it all in. In the end, the moment came when I needed to decide whether I would take communion. That day was Lady Day, so dear to Mothers Union. I decided to stay. The event being seared into my memory.

I still wonder why Christians do this to each other, but I have learnt it is so much part of our culture. I realised that the parish had lots of debates going on – which prayer book to use, what music should be approved, how church furniture should be set out, and whether we needed a greeting of peace. They weren't really of much interest to me. I was coming to church to drink from the well of the waters of new life I had glimpsed. Truly, I was seeing light in what was a dark tunnel.

I had sensed that the way of Jesus was life changing and wanted to learn more. I found myself pushed to identify what sort of Christian I was being called to be.

I was still finding my way through the scriptures and church life at the time. I wasn't really looking for answers to church politics. I wanted to know why belief in God revealed in Jesus mattered and how it made sense. I was discovering that, how should I live as a Christian, how I would make ethical choices for my good and the good of others.

In my years as an Anglican some of the questions have changed and even the way the debate occurs has changed, but I find myself shaped by the same question: What sort of Christian is Christ calling me to be?

As the Bishop of a Diocese, it naturally leads to two other questions. What sort of church is Christ calling us to become? How are we sharing the love and light of Christ for those who may be experiencing multiple forms of darkness?

The scriptures normalise questioning. The writer of Ecclesiastes spent a lifetime asking questions about meaning, purpose and the shape of a faithful life. He explored wisdom, work, ambition and achievement before concluding:

"Everything you were taught can be put into a few words: Respect and obey God! This is what life is all about."

The answer for us as Christians is simple – it is in Jesus. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. He witnesses to the Love which is the essence of God at the heart of the cosmos. We do not simply find answers in ideas or contests. We find them in God incarnate – the one who walked among us. We spend our lives learning what this means and how we follow him.

In those early years of learning the Christian faith I didn't realise just how much of the New Testament is taken up with questions. The earliest Christians wrestled with food laws and circumcision. They wrestled with the inclusion of the Gentiles. They wrestled with leadership, worship, holiness, wealth and poverty, freedom and responsibility. Christians have always wrestled with what it means to live individually and together as people who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. We apply ourselves continually to having the same mind that is in him.

We are called by Christ who adopts us into his life. We are people who continually seek the grace of the Holy Spirit. The debates among us must be about how we do this.

Our processes of Christian initiation help us. When a person makes for themselves the promises made on their behalf in baptism. We pray that they will grow in grace; that they will receive the spirit of wisdom and understanding, discernment and inner strength, knowledge and true godliness. We pray that they will be filled with wonder and awe at God's presence and daily increase in the Holy Spirit.

We pray that they, and we, will become more Christlike.

When we take those prayers seriously, we recognise that God calls together a rich tapestry of people as witnesses to the fullness of his life and love. God created humankind in his image. The rich diversity of humanity is not something to be managed but something to be gathered into Christ. It is salutary to remember that our Scriptures took shape in cultures very different from the Western assumptions that often shape our own thinking.

The risk we run in any community is that we want others only to be like us when they cannot and should not be. We strive against the isms like racism and sexism – always searching for the face of Christ in the stranger and fellow-traveller.

What sort of Christians do we want to be? What sort of church do we want to be?

Those questions matter tonight because we are gathering to open the Fifty-Fifth Synod. We do this first as the people of prayer. A community of disciples.

We are celebrating the Holy Eucharist.

We are ordaining a deacon.

The way we gather makes a difference.

Before we deliberate, we worship.

Before we vote, we gather around the table of the Lord.

Before we conduct the business of the Church, we ordain a disciple to a life of service.

In a few moments Catriona will be called to proclaim the good news of God's love; to strengthen the faithful; to teach the young; to search out the careless and indifferent; to minister among the sick, the needy and all who are oppressed or in trouble; to pray and work for peace and justice; and to model a life shaped by the Scriptures and by Christ himself.

The ministry entrusted to a deacon refuses to separate proclamation from compassion, worship from service, holiness from justice. It is one ministry because it is Christ's ministry.

Perhaps that is why, over the past half century, Anglicans across the world have found such wisdom in the Five Marks of Mission.

They remind us that the Church participates in the whole mission of God.

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom.
- To teach, baptise and nurture new believers.
- To respond to human need by loving service.

- To seek to transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and to pursue peace and reconciliation.
- To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Together they remind us that we cannot divide the ministry of Christ into competing priorities. They belong together because they belong to him.

Jesse Zink has observed that mission has often been the place where Anglicans from different cultures have found common purpose. I think he is right. Mission lifts our eyes from ourselves to God who knows us, calls us, and sends us.

Our Diocese has embraced the Five Marks of Mission as part of our own life and ministry. We affirm that the Church in this Diocese "takes its place in representing the reign of God as its community, servant and messenger." The Marks of Mission are enshrined in the Administration of Parishes Ordinance because they remind us what healthy participation in God's mission looks like.

In this Diocese we recognise the remarkable pace of secularisation and believe that Christ wants us to continue to witness to his love. We know that witness needs to be verbalised in humble proclamation and nurture. It must also be demonstrated in gracious actions and strong advocacy. Our endeavour has been to see the Five Marks of Mission lived out in parishes, agencies and schools.

For many generations we have seen the marks of mission describe the journey of a disciple: hearing the good news, being formed by the good news and then living the good news.

Increasingly, however, we find ourselves ministering in a society where people begin somewhere else.

Many first encounter the love of Christ through practical service. Others through advocacy for justice. Others through the care of a school, an aged care home or a parish community. They experience something of the Kingdom before they yet have the language to describe it.

Our calling is to help them recognise, in those encounters, the Christ who has already recognised them. The One who is calling them to fullness of life.

As we gather for this session of Synod we see our faith and witness evident in the business before us.

In and through all of this we come to Synod first as disciples. We know God's love for us and we have experienced his forgiveness. We have delighted in God's grace towards us and we have heard his call. Despite our differences, our common life is found in and through Christ.

Just over a year before that Lady Day, I was in Salamanca Market in Hobart when a clown was acting out the story of the Parable of the Seed and the Sower. He was a Jesuit and this was part of his ministry.

I was captivated by the story as I began to recognise it. I had no idea that it would be the story of my life as in the succeeding months I would have an explosion of faith as somehow and finally, the seed that was being sown was finding some good soil to land in.

My passion as the Bishop of the Diocese is shaped by recognising that I was once an outsider carrying a range of trauma and confusion. The Church reflected Christ imperfectly. At times it welcomed me with extraordinary generosity. At other times it confused and wounded me. Yet, in all of that, Christ remained faithful. In strange and often uncoordinated ways, the Church still became the ambassador of the life, light and love of Christ, and drew me in.

I think back to that Lady Day so many years ago. I left knowing not that every question had been answered, but that I had found the One to whom I could entrust my questions.

That call has sustained me ever since. My prayer is that it will sustain us also.

For as we gather around this table, ordain a new deacon and begin the work of Synod, may we never lose sight of the deeper question.

What sort of Christians is Christ calling us to become?

For if we remain faithful to that question, I believe we shall become the sort of Church Christ is calling us to become.

-ENDS-

*****Printed version of 2026 Presidential Address***

Living the hope and grief of being church

I welcome you again to this session of Synod. I am glad to be with you. as we gather to reflect on the ministry and mission of this part of God's community.

The Synod is not an annual meeting, even though it has some of those functions. It is a gathering of some of God's people who are devoted to seeking God's wisdom and guidance on their shared work. While we have business procedures, our deepest yearning is for the Holy Spirit to prompt us into the next steps of faithfulness as we seek to live and proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In seven years', Christians around the globe will mark the passing of 2,000 years since the first Easter Day. Anglicans will later in the year be invited to commit themselves to a decade of renewed discipleship between now and 2036. We know that we have a Gospel to proclaim, and we are exploring how best we can now do that. As inheritors of the Way of Jesus, we know that he is never far from us. We seek to embody the hope that he has given us, being agents of his light in darkness and his comfort in sorrow.

It is vital to acknowledge the challenges we face in the region entrusted to us. The proportion of Australians acknowledging a public connection with Christianity is at its lowest level ever, and the Anglican share of that group has declined rapidly in the last four decades.

I also want to name the grief that comes with that. We are here because we cherish the gospel shared with us and want to pass it on. We see beauty and thoughtfulness in Anglican ways. We are seeking to be faithful - and there is evidence that our work and service is making a difference - but there can also be a vivid sense of loss.

Alongside this, our world is volatile. Many people are carrying anxiety about the future, uncertainty about institutions, and a growing sense that familiar assumptions no longer hold in the way they once did. People are also searching for meaning, stability, and trustworthy community. We sense God's call to be part of that.

The sort of grief we feel is often called "ambiguous grief" because there are many sources of loss and we are unable to move to any form of closure. It is grief that remains with us. Our response must involve finding ways of navigating it.

One of the clues offered to us from psychology is to avoid polarised thinking. We are invited to try to hold multiple truths together. For example, we can celebrate the growth in faith of a new Christian and be worried about declining church attendance.

The psychological clues reflect the wisdom of faith traditions. We are encouraged to make time to be with a broad range of people, including people who, simply by living differently, invite us to think differently. We are also encouraged to find new things that offer us glimmers of hope - actions that offer light to darkness.

Another way of bringing the breadth of these insights to our context is to recognise that, when change occurs, we are invited to adapt our mindset to new circumstances.

I am encouraged by Pope Leo XIV teaching both in relation to peace between nations and on the ethic constraints on artificial intelligence. These are valuable contributions to life in the second quarter of the 21st Century.

Synodal mindset

Our purpose has not changed. We are called to proclaim Christ, make disciples, serve our communities and participate in God's mission in the places where we have been planted. The challenge before us is how we bear faithful witness in a changing society.

In 2016-17, at the same time as we were being confronted with the hearings of the Royal Commission, we were being challenged by the insights from our governance review. We were hearing clearly that our way of being a diocese carried institutional and personal risk - effectively for everyone. This further crystallised for us during the first years of COVID, when we saw both opportunities and challenges in running the agencies and schools.

I knew something of the challenge when I was elected the Diocesan Bishop in November 2017 but couldn't fully comprehend what was in store for me.

At times I sense around me a nostalgia for simpler times when things were different and less demanding. Our parishes, agencies, and schools, all experience tighter regulatory environments than ever before. I haven't met anyone who doesn't wish for less paperwork – or computer work. But when we examine those simpler times, we also acknowledge that there was insufficient attention to people's dignity and safety.

I don't have nostalgia for the pre-1987 Anglican Church when women were barred from exercising full and equal teaching and sacramental leadership. I don't want to see a return to government and societal practices that created ongoing grief and trauma for First Nations people as individuals and communities. This was expressed so starkly in the 1997 Bringing them Home report. I don't want to see a rolling back of the sense of equality that LGBTQIA+ citizens felt when Australians expressed support for a broad definition of marriage.

It would be hubris to say that this is the most difficult era to be a bishop. I often think about our second Bishop – Josiah Pearson - who experienced deep and long-lasting depression in part because of complexities he faced. Or our fourth Bishop, Jack Stretch, who worked with others to establish children's homes and a school for girls as part of rebuilding in the face of the devastating impact of WW1 on the region.

In every age, we seek the wisdom of the Holy Spirit to give us the ways of thinking we need to engage the context we face. Newcastle Anglican is learning how to remain faithful as a formative Christian community under post-Christendom conditions.

As Synod, we endeavour to form something of a collective mindset. We celebrate what has been possible, we are curious about the challenges confronting us, and we look in hope to where God will lead us in the period ahead.

In keeping with other dioceses, we have long recognised that the mission of Christ, which shapes the mission of this church, is expressed not only in congregations. It is expressed in educational, health, and social service endeavours.

Our synodal mindset is not simply a compilation of parish thinking but a missional approach through which we consider how all our work enables the fullness of God's love and grace is expressed, recognised, and named.

It is impossible in an address such as this to give witness to the complexity of the work undertaken by this Diocese through our parishes, agencies, schools, and shared services. We are a significant regional organisation with more than 2000 paid employees and a similar number of volunteers. Our combined income is more than \$200 million, most of which goes towards providing direct benefit.

Across parishes, schools, agencies, chaplaincies, and community ministries, we participate in a shared vocation of forming people in dignity, compassion, service, prayer, justice, and hope. We promote human flourishing inspired by the Way of Jesus.

I am grateful for the close working relationship I have with the Assistant Bishops and CEO. Charlie, Sonia, and John, you help shape my mindset as together we face the opportunity and challenges before Newcastle Anglican.

We have significant challenges and opportunities –

- Finding at least \$10 million more for our redress funding obligations
- Shaping and supporting a sustainable footprint of congregational ministry
- Responding to regional growth and demographic change
- Finding the realistic approach to risk so that we take some informed chances

- Ensuring efficiency and consistency of work outcomes

I am grateful to the Diocesan Council, the NAC Board, the Redress Corporation Board, and the Professional Standards office. I could name many others. I am grateful for the people who turn up every day to contribute to the flourishing of others. I am grateful to the people who across the whole of life and engage with us for and in service, ministry and work.

I look forward to what this Synod will bring to that ongoing work.

Safeguarding people

I recognise that the people of our Diocese are trying to find a way of expressing their grief at the consequence of the reality of abuse in our midst without minimising the need for a proper response to that abuse. When we close a church, there is a level of recognition at the strategy for funding redress but there is also sadness at the loss of connection with the symbol and stories that the church represents.

I hear the same as people grapple with implementing our screening, training, and supervision of ministry workforce which, for the parishes, is mostly volunteers. We know that continuous learning and regular ongoing education and training are important for our workers (paid and voluntary) to continually build their abilities to keep people safe. We know the importance of screening, effective recruitment, consistent management, and effective oversight. These actions play a vital role in protecting people from harm.

It is also okay to say that these vital practices have changed us. We miss some of the informality when it appeared safe and enjoyable. Sometimes I hear people say, “Bishop, when can we stop focussing on this?” I don’t think the time ever will or should come. We must always be prepared to show we have changed and take redress into the heart of our lives. Many organisations, including other dioceses, are feeling heightened pressure around redress funding. The courts are still shaping the legal environment through which past wrongs are evaluated and expectations of future behaviour are spelt out.

Earlier this year, the High Court of Australia handed down its decision in *AA v The Trustees of the Roman Catholic Church for the Diocese of Maitland-Newcastle*. The Court reinforced that where institutions authorise ministry, confer authority, create structures of trust, and place clergy or church workers into positions of pastoral responsibility, those institutions also carry substantial legal responsibilities for safeguarding, supervision, accountability, and protection.

Importantly, the Court looked beyond internal church distinctions and focused upon the practical reality of institutional authority, oversight, appointment, and public trust.

For dioceses such as our own, this reflects a legal and social environment in which parish ministry cannot be separated from diocesan responsibility.

The work we have been undertaking across the Diocese continues to reflect the legal and social expectations now placed upon churches and religious institutions. Without these structures, individual parishes, clergy, and parish officers would carry levels of legal, financial, and personal exposure that would be far more difficult to sustain than the pressures we are currently feeling. Part of our task is to build healthier cultures of shared responsibility so that clergy, parish officers, frontline workers, volunteers, and shared service structures each carry their appropriate role. In the second half of this year, we will conduct some training for Churchwardens about their pivotal safeguarding role.

As we shape our mindset, we can carry two thoughts at once. We can speak about the weight of change and express our commitment to safeguarding.

Growing in our understanding

I want to apply this to the way we approach our mission.

Our mindset is the beliefs and instincts we use to navigate the world. It helps us assess what feels true, what feels threatening, what feels right, what feels unthinkable. As Christians, our lives are shaped by how we hear scripture, imagine God, and relate to one another.

In our early years, we take things in as they are given to us. Over time, most of us begin to question, to reflect, to look at things differently. We may be encouraged to be curious, or our curiosity can be challenged. For almost all of us, our mindset will hold for extensive periods until something challenges us deeply. For example, coming to Australia as an 8-year-old was one such challenge for me.

Our mindset is shaped by the groups we belong to. Those connections shape how we read people, how we respond to authority, how we manage anxiety, and how we attach. They impact how we interpret silence, tone, and conflict. Most of what we believe - whether religious or not - has been inherited, shaped by our early experience, and reinforced by the people around us. At its simplest, it can be expressed like this:

“I see the world this way because my people see the world this way.”

Our mindset works - until it doesn't.

We do not need to be afraid of the moments that challenge our mindset. Throughout scripture, transformation often begins precisely when our certainty no longer works. Briefly, two powerful New Testament accounts witness to this. We see Nicodemus seek out Jesus at night for a conversation about faith and

eternal life. We see the disciples on the road to Emmaus encounter the risen Christ in confusion, grief, hospitality, and recognition.

As we accompany people who are reflecting on life, faith, and belief we experience exquisite pastoral moments.

We are living in a time when our ecclesial mindset as Australian Anglicans is filled with challenge. Our inherited ways of understanding are not sufficient for the experience around us. There are people disenchanted with the failings of the secular heritage. They are looking for alternate options for meaning, purpose, and connection.

There is in front of us the call and challenge of being a church of intentional discipleship and formation. We are called to nurture communities (within the church and beyond) which are capable of holding conviction, curiosity, compassion, and commitment together.

Our response can be shaped by:

- Holding multiple perspectives together – and finding language which builds bridges of conversation
- Creating hospitable spaces where people can be and grow together
- Exploring new avenues rather than simply be held by the darkness of despair

One of the simplest and most demanding practices we can undertake is to pause and try to see the world from another person's perspective - to imagine, even briefly, what it might be like to walk in their shoes.

I have found this challenging and confronting at times. Our call to love our neighbour requires more. We are invited to listen deeply enough to recognise the fears, wounds, and hopes carried by other people, including the wounds Christians have caused. Some of things I have heard in the last 12 months -

- Listening to women speak about what they do to feel safe when walking alone.
- Hearing members of the LGBTIQ+ community describe the calculations they make to be safe in public spaces.
- Listening to people embracing a socially conservative worldview trying to understand where they position themselves in multicultural Australia.
- Hearing people of different cultural backgrounds speak about the assumptions made about them because of their name or appearance.
- Listening to Jewish people explain their experience ongoing anti-semitism.
- Hearing the cries of Palestinian people fearing complete loss of hope.
- Listening to religious people wonder how faith takes shape in secular Australia.

Walking in other people's shoes is a commitment to curiosity. It broadens our encounter with one another and enables us to experience the fullness of God's world.

Some of what we hear will make us uncomfortable. But discomfort is not always something to avoid. Sometimes it is where truth begins to emerge.

Our call as the church is to help people shape their mindset. We do this as people living in the Spirit confident of God's generosity and love revealed in Jesus.

I am excited that one of the tangible expressions of this will be the launching of our first Newcastle Anglican – Diocese wide – Reconciliation Action Plan.

What do things look like for us in our parishes?

Earlier, I mentioned the grief and challenge facing clergy and people involved in parish ministry. We have fewer resources and face higher expectations than ever before.

We have largely moved beyond inviting people to church simply out of concern for institutional survival. Our focus is on people and what best serves their flourishing in Christ. At the same time, we do carry a concern for the present and future contribution of Anglican Christianity within society, particularly through the life of our local churches.

Across many of our church traditions we are seeing new people come. At the same time, many younger people leave in search of stronger peer communities, and some families move churches seeking greater support for spiritual formation and parenting.

Our heartland is a church grounded in a pastoral model that takes seriously the teaching of the faith, the sacramental life of the Church, and participation in God's mission in the world through evangelism, service, and advocacy.

Forming disciples emerges from this pastoral model. We establish relationships in which we can explore, with respect, how people see the world. In time, dialogue emerges. Alongside this, we are always at prayer. An integral part of our mission is to remain present to people in such a way that they may encounter faithful Christians, Christian community and the presence of Christ.

As The Gospel Coalition recently observed: "Small groups, shared meals, serving together inside and outside the church, and corporate worship are all ways churches can cultivate community. Such churches provide young adults with a rare commodity in today's world: a place to belong as they learn what it means to be Jesus's disciples."

In this season, clergy and parishes will need to learn how to prioritise wisely. Faithful ministry requires clarity about what we are called to do well, sustainably, and together. It is impossible to do everything. Safeguarding rightly remains a central responsibility. Alongside this, we must discern what we can faithfully bring to our common life and focus our energy where it most serves Christ's mission.

There are two significant initiatives planned over the next two years. We are exploring further ways to simplify and support parishes in meeting administrative and governance requirements. We are also exploring ways to recruit people with the skills to help plant additional ministries. Our focus is in seeking candidates in Ministry Training who are supportive of the Diocesan ethos.

Part of that prioritisation must be shaped by what the Church is uniquely called to do. One of our essential callings is to remain at prayer when others may not or cannot pray. In Christ, we bring the world and its concerns into the heart of God.

In that spirit, I commend to you the Living the Word community being formed around regular scriptural reflection, teaching on prayer, and shared intercession.

Moral teaching

One of the deep questions we encounter as people explore faith and meaning - and as we seek to share faith with others - concerns personal morality and, in many Anglican contexts, sexual ethics. While there should be many other areas of challenge around morality and ethics, this has become the core issue leading to demarcation between Anglicans and between faith groups and the wider community.

Questions of ethics and moral teaching matter because discipleship matters. They are not, however, the whole of Christian life. The Church exists to worship God, proclaim the gospel, make disciples, serve our neighbours and participate in God's reconciling work in the world. Our moral teaching must therefore be understood within the broader context of our vocation and mission.

Many people who engage with our parishes, schools, agencies, and ministries come from complex family experiences and relationships. Some carry deep wounds associated with shame, rejection, exclusion, or failure. Others are seeking to understand whether a Christian community can still be a place where they are treated with dignity, honesty, compassion, and respect.

More than six years ago, after diocesan consultation, the Diocesan Council articulated clear expectations regarding integrity, faithfulness, accountability, non-exploitation, and responsible relationships. Faithfulness in Service states:

“Within the Christian life maintaining integrity in intimate relationships means forsaking all other relationships and cherishing the person to whom our life is bound. Sexual intimacy is a particular expression of this tender union in which there is no place for casualisation of intimacy or predatory behaviour in which your conduct may be seen as exploiting or endeavouring to exploit another person for your gratification.”

There are parts of the Anglican Church of Australia which believe the Church’s witness requires a more bounded articulation of traditional sexual ethics, particularly around marriage and ordination. Our approach seeks to uphold fidelity, responsibility, dignity, equality, and care, while also engaging honestly with the lived reality of people and families within contemporary Australian society.

These questions continue to be contested across the Anglican Church of Australia. I am convinced by the approach we are taking of engaging prayerfully, thoughtfully, pastorally, and with theological seriousness as part of our wider calling to proclaim and embody the way of Christ. As your Diocesan Bishop, I remain committed to engaging these questions prayerfully, pastorally, and in conversation with the people of this Diocese. The key forum for this listening will be the Synod.

Being a people sent by Christ

We are living through a period of significant transition - culturally, spiritually, institutionally, and ecclesially. Many inherited assumptions no longer hold in the way they once did. Yet the Christian vocation remains.

The future of this Diocese will not ultimately be determined by our capacity to win arguments. It will be shaped by the quality of our discipleship, the depth of our prayer, the faithfulness of our witness and the strength of our service to the communities entrusted to our care.

The Church has always lived through periods of disruption and re-formation. This is ours.

As Newcastle Anglicans, we are called to proclaim and embody the Way of Jesus within this time and place - thoughtfully, prayerfully, courageously, and faithfully.

-ENDS-