

Vision for the Long Term: Planning for the middle of the century

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Let's face it, the title of this talk is incredibly pretentious. Who among us has any real idea what life will be like forty-three years from now? The pace of change we have experienced in the last fifty years should caution us against predicting the future too quickly. Who in 1957 really thought the world market would be saturated with mobile phones within fifty years? Who had any idea about the internet and the revolution it would bring? Who could have imagined computers you could fit in your pocket? Who would have expected communism to crumble in Europe, global warming to be the world's number one menace, or the Olympic Games to be staged in Beijing? And if the world has changed so dramatically in the last fifty years, who can really say what the world will be like in 2050?

The world-wide face of Christianity has changed dramatically over the last fifty years as well. Fifty years ago Sydney was gearing up for the first great Billy Graham Crusade in this country. Church attendance in Australia was bolstered by large numbers of nominal Christians and local church ministry was almost exclusively the province of the ordained. Many of today's church leaders were still unconverted in 1957. Liberal theology was still going strong in Europe and America. Even the massive figure of Karl Barth in Switzerland had not really stemmed the tide. Evangelical Christianity was certainly growing but only beginning to emerge from the defensive posture it had taken throughout the first half of the twentieth century. In Britain John Stott, Jim Packer, F. F. Bruce and others were adding depth to the thinking of many. In Australia T. C. Hammond was still giving the occasional lecture at

Moore College. Broughton Knox was not yet Principal of Moore College! We sent missionaries to Africa and could scarcely imagine that at the beginning of the new century it would be the African Christians that would call for the Anglican Communion to return to the Bible.

The world — even just the Christian world — has radically altered over the past fifty years and there is no reason to expect the pace of change to slow over the next fifty. So who am I kidding when I suggest we could talk sensibly about a vision for the middle of the century? Indeed, who could possibly have the kind of vision that's needed? And yet, vision on that scale is precisely what we do need because there are certain things we can be sure will still be on our agenda fifty years from now.

If the Lord has not returned by the year 2050 there will still be vast tracts of the world unevangelised. In the last fifteen years men and women have taken up the challenge of re-evangelising Europe. Perhaps in fifty years time there will be a need to re-evangelise Canada and America. If the NCLS trends continue as they are, vast tracts of Australia will be without a vital Christian witness and so here too there will still be a need for evangelism. And even if we have reached the initial target of 10% of the population of Sydney in Bible-based churches, in 2050 that will still leave 5.1 million people outside of them!¹ Our gospel mission will still be urgent in 2050. Men and women will still need to hear of Jesus.

It is now 5 years since we embarked on our diocesan mission. Since that time we have seen wonderful signs that God is at work drawing men and women to himself. Unprecedented numbers of men and women are flooding our theological colleges — not only Moore College, but SMBC, Morling and the Presbyterian Theological Centre. God is raising up labourers for the harvest all over the place and in many denominations. Churches have been planted. And congregations have grown. But we haven't really begun to do more than scratch the surface.

¹ Australian Government, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, *Population Projects*, online at www.workplace.gov.au/NR/rdonlyres/D0636666-F1F3-4068-A661-1981452BF2DF/0/PopulationprojectionsDec05.pdf

There are millions of people in Sydney who remain in their rebellious independence, not knowing or refusing to know Jesus and the forgiveness of sins that comes to us only in him. The mission is certainly going strong, but the harvest field of Sydney is huge and getting bigger all the time. Reaching Sydney-siders with the gospel of Jesus Christ must remain our great passion. Evangelism cannot be just one task amongst many. It has to give shape to all we do and all we plan to do. In 2007, 2017, 2027, 2050 — our focus must not shift from this tremendous opportunity God has given us.

Of course, evangelism doesn't end with the decision to trust Christ. Sometimes the impression is given is that evangelism is about getting people to that point and then moving on to look for the next 'target'. We look for more and more conversions, more and more new beginnings, more and more prayers or ticks in the box. But the goal of evangelism in the New Testament—the goal of the apostle Paul's ministry, for one—was not the initial decision but a mature faith which makes it through to the last day (Phil. 1:10; 1 Thess. 3:13; 5:23). The work of gospel ministry was not over when the new life began, but the gospel was to be repeatedly brought to bear so that minds and lives and communities might be shaped by that gospel and honour the Lord whose gospel it is. He didn't play British bulldog with people. You remember the game, don't you — track them down, lift them up and once you've got them for the count, drop them and look around for the next one. Paul gave himself to seeing people through to maturity. It's a key reason why he wrote his letters. It's why he kept visiting the churches established in the wake of his ministry. It's why he stayed at Ephesus and taught and prayed and loved — giving himself for the sake of those with whom he had first shared the gospel (Acts 20:13–38).

Evangelism must remain the throbbing heart of what we are on about as a diocese. And yet our evangelism needs this long-term perspective, not being satisfied with a profession of faith and recognising that we are not at the end yet. There is a race to be run and in most cases it is

not a sprint. The penitent thief who died on the cross beside Jesus is an exception. For most of us the end of the life of faith is somewhat more distant from the beginning.

Even more importantly in one sense, we run this race set before us in the same way we began it: by taking the gospel seriously. As Paul warned the Galatians, you don't begin in one way and continue on in another (Gal. 3:1–6). It's been said that the Christian life is a continuous circling around the gospel of Jesus Christ, understanding better what Jesus has done for us and why he did it, recognising our continuing need of his mercy, teasing out the way his action for us determines the way we respond individually and together. The job is not done until they make it home.

This will mean that, as the century unfolds, we need to give more concentrated attention to how the gospel shapes life on the other side of the decision to believe, and in particular how it shapes what we do when we get together. In our diocese, a lot of time and thought has been given to the doctrine of the church and in particular to correcting misunderstandings of the church in the light of the teaching of Scripture. We understand the importance of gathering in God's purposes (Matt. 16:178; Heb. 12:22–24; Rev. 7:9–10). We rejoice in the reality of the fellowship we share with others who have been rescued just as we have been. And we insist on an open face to the world, which means not only trying to avoid inwardness and self-indulgence but a concentrated effort to remove all barriers which might prevent an outsider from understanding what we are on about and what we consider is important. We try hard to ensure that church is not so alien an experience that the visitor or outsider cannot access what is happening or understand the message which lies at the heart of our time together (1 Cor 14:23–25). Yet as we move forward further into the century, we could do well to keep thinking about God's gospel and what we do when we get together. Do we give the impression that anything significant is happening when we gather as congregations of God's people? If we still believe that the central reality of the Christian gathering is the word which God

addresses to his people, and so it is still right to speak of meeting with God as well as with each other, can we afford any suggestion that this activity is really something ordinary?

I remember the way Broughton Knox used to gloss the first answer in the Westminster Shorter Catechism. He used to insist that it was an Anglican document, written by Anglicans, and something worth our attention. The first question goes like this: 'What is the chief end of man?' The standard answer is 'To glorify God and enjoy him forever'. Broughton's gloss meant the first answer went like this: 'To glorify God and enjoy him in the fellowship of his people forever'. There is something about that image that sticks in the mind — my mind anyway.

We never want to return to the strict formality and artificiality which characterised at least some Christian gatherings in the past. Gathering with God's people must mean taking each other seriously as well as the opportunities for service that arise when we are together. The critical difference between 'church' and our own private prayer and Bible reading is that we are together, 'in the fellowship of his people'. And that fellowship must have a sense of reality about it. Precisely for this reason the work of ministry has 'building each other up' as a proper concern. But in our rush to address the imbalances of the past and to work together for the good of the body, it is at least theoretically possible to ignore that this happens as we meet with, or better, are met by God in his word. Church is not just a study group or a training centre. Church is a gathering around the powerful, confronting and encouraging address of the living God. Recapturing this sense of the significance of our gatherings might actually prove to be an important part of getting on with the mission.

Perhaps we need to let the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ penetrate more deeply into our thinking about the mission we are engaged in. It is not a short term thing. It cannot be satisfied simply with a multitude of initial decisions. Looking to 2050 will mean going all out to bring men and women all the way from unbelief to maturity on the last day. And part of

doing that effectively, a vital part of reaching the ten percent and beyond, will be to take even more seriously the opportunity afforded by our gathering around the word of God.

But there is something else as well which we can be confident must characterise our life together as we head towards 2050. Already we are aware of the forces of globalisation. We are part of something larger than ourselves and we cannot stick our head in the sand and pretend we are all there is. It was something extraordinary to travel overseas fifty years ago. The very wealthy could afford to do it but few others. Now it is much more commonplace. Communication has become much easier. Cheap phone cards abound. You can talk the U.K. for less than 2c per minute. And satellite television, email and the internet ensure that we can know what is happening elsewhere literally as it happens. We are plugged into the world already. We can only expect it to be more intense, more immediate, and more accessible fifty years from now. And so the cause of the gospel of Jesus beyond our diocesan borders will inevitably become more of a concern to us as the century rolls on.

Let me give you one example. We are told that by the year 2050 there will be a billion African Christians south of the Sahara. Imagine that. A billion men and women who belong to Christ. Already the mostly untrained pastors in that part of the world are overworked! How are these people to be cared for? How will they be rooted and established in the truth and nurtured as they run the race towards the goal of a faithful end as well as a faithful beginning? What's more, already, in 2007, others have noticed the great growth of the churches in Africa and the influence they are beginning to exercise beyond their own borders. The global south of the Anglican Communion has led the call to faithfulness in belief and practice, and many in the old world, the world riddled with liberal theology and plain old unbelief, are annoyed and are planning their response. Who will help those with little training but with a wonderful determination to stand up for the truth, to resist the pressure to conform to the patterns of the old west? Can we afford to ignore them? What they are doing and the need they have is not something distant from us anymore. It has drawn very close.

And if we don't see that God has given us precisely the kind of resources that they need so very desperately and if we do not take up the opportunity that stands before us, undoubtedly others will. If pastors aren't trained to know what is wrong with the ideas that they will be swamped with before long, then Africa too might go the way of the Mediterranean, Europe and North America. Of those to whom much has been given, much will be expected (Lk 12:48).

I'm sure there is much more that we could put our minds to under this heading of *Planning for the Middle of the Century*. We could have spent time just thinking about Moore College. Do you realise that historically speaking, it will be an anomaly if Moore College remains unambiguously evangelical through to the middle of the century? So many other fine evangelical training institutions have lost their way in just a few short years. That's a salutary warning, isn't it? But I have wanted to concentrate tonight on just three things really. Firstly, *the continuing priority of the mission or evangelism*. The mission we are involved in is not a ten year mission, or even a fifty year mission. It is what we are on about, what we will always be on about. Secondly, *a view of evangelism that doesn't stop at the initial decision but takes seriously the goal of maturity in Christ and being found faithful on the last day*. The mission statement of the diocese speaks of 'being established in the fellowship of Jesus' disciples' and we must take this with renewed seriousness if we are going to be faithful to the New Testament vision of mission and if what we are doing now is to have any lasting impact at all. And thirdly, *the pressing global, rather than simply diocesan, context of our evangelistic mission*. We are more and more closely tied to the life of our brothers and sisters all over the world and our vision needs to large enough to include serving them as well with the gospel of the Lord Jesus.

Visions and mission statements are strange things. We can speak about them as if they are our own, as if we had the power to bring them about on our own. But you and I know that this simply is not true. God has given us what we enjoy today. The heritage of the past to which we are so greatly indebted is his good gift to us. And it is only by his power that anything at

all will be accomplished by our feeble efforts. Only by an extraordinary work of mercy will we get to anything like 10% of the population in Bible believing churches. Only by his sustaining power will we and those we minister to, grow to maturity and remain faithful to the end. Only by his enabling will we provide anything useful to those growing churches in Africa and elsewhere. That's why, isn't it, that our diocesan mission statement gives such prominence to the phrase 'in prayerful dependence on the Holy Spirit'? Our first response to any talk about what lies before us in the next forty-three years must be to pray.

2050 looks a long way off to some, not so distant to others. I, for one, don't expect to be around for the celebrations. I'd be well over my three score years and ten and even the four score! But we cannot afford to be preoccupied with the immediate. We need to think about the long term, should the Lord grant us that much time. We don't know what the world will be like exactly; it's changing all the time. But we know the eternal gospel of the risen Lord Jesus. And the priorities given to us in that gospel are the priorities we need to preserve as disciples of Christ, as churches and as a diocese.