

The President's Address
To the Nineteenth General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia
10 August 2026

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Welcome and Acknowledgement

Grace and peace to you all from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Welcome to this Nineteenth Session of the General Synod of the Anglican Church of Australia.

I begin by acknowledging the Custodians of the land on which we meet today, the peoples of the Kulin Nation. I also pay my respects to their Elders past and present and those who are rising up to become elders.

I also acknowledge and honour the rich heritage of Indigenous Christian leadership associated with Naarm/Melbourne.

Women and men like William Barak, Margaret Tucker, William Cooper and Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls proclaimed the gospel, planted churches, responded to human need and advocated for justice. Through their witness God has challenged and changed our nation. I also give thanks for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander clergy and laity who stand in that fine heritage, including those who are part of this Synod.

Since commencing as Primate in November I have been on a learning journey. That journey has been smoothed by the experience and expertise of retiring General Secretary Ms Anne Hywood, her successor Mrs Juliet Wenden and the rest of the General Synod office team. Archbishop Geoffrey Smith was very generous in sharing his wisdom and orienting me into the role. I am also thankful for the wisdom of the General Synod Standing Committee and Executive and for all of you who have prayed, prepared and set aside time to discern and decide together.

A Context of Uncertainty

When the 18th General Synod met just over four years ago it did so in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. While I can testify from recent personal experience that the virus has not disappeared altogether the disruption and dislocation we encountered at the height of the spread has passed. So too, sadly, have some of the positive

impacts – an increased level of trust in social and political institutions, a willingness to engage neighbours with compassion and kindness.

Instead it appears that in 2026 we are in an era of increasing distrust and uncertainty.

That uncertainty has several dimensions.

One is economic. On some measures at least we would seem to be living in prosperous times. Unemployment, for example, remains relatively low. However, other indicators are less promising. Productivity growth is sluggish, real wage growth negligible to negative, the cost of living is increasing and while the rise in housing asset prices and housing in particular has benefited some it has locked others out of opportunities previous generations took for granted. All this contributes to a perception that the benefits of prosperity are being shared unequally. Consistent with this, the Edelman Trust Barometer's 2026 report for Australia found a substantial and growing 'trust' gap between high and low-income earners¹.

At the social level our sense of community and cohesion has come under increasing pressure. To name one indicator, The Scanlon Foundation's 2025 report on Mapping Social Cohesion² found that its index of social cohesion rose from 82 in 2018 to a peak of 92 in 2020 before declining to 78 in 2025. Allied to this was a decline in people's sense of belonging to Australia and a reduction in trust in government and the political system.

There are several specific contributors to and manifestations of these trends.

The current Royal Commission into Antisemitism and Social Cohesion has highlighted the exclusion and hostility experienced by our Jewish neighbours and colleagues in the lead up to and in the aftermath of the December 14, 2025, terrorist attack at Bondi. This is worthy of particular reflection on the part of Christians, not least because of our own tragic history of complicity in this area. Several years ago I spent a sobering afternoon reading translations of Medieval Hebrew poems; so many of them being laments composed on the occasion of pogroms initiated by those acting in the Name of Christ. As I reflected on the events of December 2025 and October 2023 I felt their pogrom-like character; how much more so the community that was on the receiving end of such atrocities.

More broadly, at least at the level of online rhetoric and public debate there is a tendency to see those who differ from us in some regard as a potential threat rather than a potential partner; increasingly we find it easier to ascribe motives and intentions to others on the basis of their religious, political and cultural identities rather than as a result of patient conversation.

¹ The report can be found at <https://www.edelman.com/trust/2026/trust-barometer>.

² The report can be found at <https://scanloninstitute.org.au/mapping-social-cohesion-2025/>

Perhaps downstream from these developments we have seen growing uncertainty at the political level. The clearest manifestation of this has been the declining share of votes going to the two traditional political blocs and the rise of independents and newer political parties on the left and right.

Beyond and beneath, there are more fundamental questions being asked at a national or existential level. What does it mean to be Australian? What are the “tacit assumptions and latent frameworks of meaning”³ that bind us together notwithstanding our disagreements? Are we a multicultural or monocultural nation and if the latter who gets to decide what constitutes that culture?

In recent years two books Julianne Schultz’s *The Idea of Australia*⁴ and Tony Abbott’s *Australia*⁵ have explored these questions through an overview of our national story. Notwithstanding their different politics and narrative styles they both engage with Noel Pearson’s framework for understanding Australia in terms of our ancient Indigenous heritage, British legal and cultural foundations and postwar immigrant flavouring. Both also regard the result of the Referendum on the Voice to Parliament in October 2023 as profoundly revelatory – for Schultz because it showed our inability to reconcile our egalitarian aspirations with our anxieties around race, for Abbott because it represented the triumph of a liberal emphasis on the rights and equality of individuals over and against privilege afforded on the basis of group identity.

Beginning with Hope

Yet uncertainty is not merely a problem to be solved. It can also be an invitation to rediscover the source of our confidence. Christians have never located their hope in social cohesion, economic prosperity or political stability. We locate it in the faithfulness of God.

Seen in this light, it was both timely and providential that during 2025 the Anglican Church of Australia engaged in a season of focussed evangelism and outreach under the theme of the hope which Jesus offers to an uncertain world.

Hope25 had its origins in a motion passed at the Eighteenth Session of General Synod which urged the Standing Committee and its Commissions to keep obedience to the first Mark of Mission (“To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom”) firmly in view in all their work. This was picked up then by the Standing Committee Executive, who recommended to the first Standing Committee meeting that Evangelism as a national Church be one of its four strategic initiatives for the subsequent four years.

³ The wording comes from James Davidson Hunter *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America’s Political Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 2024, pxiv

⁴ 2nd edition, Allen and Unwin, 2025.

⁵ Harper Collins, 2025

Later in our gathering we will hear at more length about what God did through this initiative, but it does highlight what can happen when Australian Anglicans collaborate in mission through a combination of centralised resourcing and encouragement and more local design and implementation. I do wish to record my particular thanks to Bishop Richard Condie and the other members of the Ministry and Mission Commission for their oversight of this venture and to all of you who participated through prayer, worship and witness. A personal highlight for Monica and I was attending an outreach dinner in one of our smaller Parishes that attracted almost five per cent of the local population.

What are the defining features of Christian hope? First, it is personal. In 1 Peter 1:3 believers are assured that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ “has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Christian hope is also communal. In passages such as 1 Thessalonians 1:2-3 the fledgling church is commended for “your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ.” Hope is something they manifest together. Finally, and ultimately Christian hope is cosmic. It looks forward not just to the salvation of individuals or the redemption of a people but to the liberation of creation itself when Christ returns (Romans 8:21).

In his poem Hope, originating in Warsaw during the darkest days of World War 2, Nobel Laureate Czeslaw Milosz writes as follows

*“Hope is with you when you believe
The earth is not a dream but living flesh
That sight, touch, and hearing do not lie,
That all things you have ever seen here
Are like a garden looked at from a gate.”*

Hope in general assures us that our present sensory experiences are neither illusory nor meaningless but part of an unfolding story. Christian hope deepens this intuition through confidence in the past, present and future action of God the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Engaging our world in hope will mean bearing witness to this divine action. In a series of works Andrew Root has traced how our modern secular age makes talk of divine action so problematic. We are so used to discerning and describing the order of things without reference to God, so wary of the ways in which God-talk can be used to obfuscate and manipulate that we risk confining God to the arenas of private religious experience or abstract ideas. To counter this “the way to perceive divine

action in a secular age is to give your attention to events, to be willing to be present to them.”⁶

Engaging our nation in hope will then mean giving attention to the action of God within its life, not to justify the nation but as an action of witness to the faithfulness of God despite our failings corporate and individual. It will mean recovering the Pauline emphasis on the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ as a dynamic power at work in our world. When St Paul writes to the Colossian Church “You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the beginning”⁷ he disavows any notion that the gospel is merely an inert message which he delivered to them like a sales pitch.

Hence when we come to consider the relationship between the gospel and Noel Pearson’s three aspects of our national identity (Indigenous Heritage, British Foundations, Immigrant Flavouring) we must resist any attempt to co-opt the gospel as if were merely another ideology to be deployed to advance the interests of one group at the expense of others. Nor should the gospel be regarded as dependent for its progress on the ascendancy of one strand over the others. Instead, we should ask “how has, is and might God be at work through the gospel in these three aspects of our national life?”

Here we might point to the faithfulness of God who in Christ “has revealed to us your presence in the vastness of this land, your love in its fruitfulness, and your purpose in its cycles of death and renewed life.”⁸ We also remember and celebrate the faithfulness of servants like James and Angelina Noble, two Aboriginal Christian leaders who in the first part of the twentieth century travelled across Northern Australia to share Christ and to bring shameful acts of dispossession and murder to light. We might rejoice that an ancient and living culture has become the means through which the good news is embodied and communicated in fresh ways.

Here we might also point to the rich heritage of the Catholic faith renewed in the English Reformation, through which God continues to nurture our discipleship as the Scriptures are read and as we gather in ordered worship. We might remember with gratitude figures like Frances Perry and Eliza Hassall and Richard Johnson and Sydney James Kirkby, whose names and ministries are commemorated in our Lectionary.

Finally we might also point to the many leaders and churches God has raised up in the last fifty years from those who’ve come to our shores in the post-war era, and how the Anglican Church of Australia would be a much smaller and less interesting group of people without their presence and contribution.

⁶ Andrew Root *The Pastor in a Secular Age* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), p206

⁷ Colossians 1:5-6

⁸ *A Prayer Book for Australia*, p161.

Most of all, we might and should give thanks that the work of God across these three strands has never been in competition but always complementary, because we worship a God of abundance whose grace is never a zero-sum game. Hence the folly of enshrining one culture or expression of culture as normative, since culture is as dynamic as the God who is constantly at work in through and above it for His glory.

None of this of course means that decisions don't have to be made. To take one example the level and composition of our migration intake is a legitimate subject of national debate and economic, social and environmental factors are rightly part of that conversation. However, if God has acted to dignify every human being as someone made in God's image and as someone for whom Christ died such debates must never become the pretext for demeaning the other, for in so doing we demean ourselves.

Likewise, a humble confidence in God's action in the gospel will inform a robust and thoughtful approach to social cohesion. Humility reminds us that the Anglican Church of Australia has never and will never be established and that we claim no particular institutional privilege over and above any religious or other group which seeks to contribute to our common good. Confidence assures us that we nonetheless serve the Lord Jesus in Whom all things hold together⁹. The Church always betrays its calling when it becomes merely just another special interest group advocating for its own survival rather than bearing witness to this greater reality. With than in mind the following calls outlined in the Church of England Bishops' Working Group on "Promoting Unity in our Nation"¹⁰ are a helpful starter

- . the call to humility – and an honest reckoning of our history
- . the call to publicly celebrate pride in (our nation) while opposing prejudice
- . the call to see every person as gifted – including those marginalised by wider society
- . the call to build relationships across difference
- . the call to form active citizens, inspired by their faith

Our schools and welfare agencies are already at the forefront of engaging our culture in the Name of Christ and there is much we can learn from them in this regard. I recall, for example, a conversation with the Principal of an Anglican school, whose student body reflected the religious diversity of its immediate neighbourhood. She explained Anglican identity in these terms – "we are a school that celebrates Easter and the other great festivals of the Christian faith, but we are also a school

⁹ Colossians 1:17

¹⁰ The paper can be found at <https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2026-06/gs-2449-promoting-unity-in-our-nation.pdf>

which acknowledges that members of our community will be celebrating their festivals as well.”

Working Together in Hope

There are a number of issues that will require our careful and hopeful attention this Synod gathering.

Supporting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ministry

I have referred above to the rejection of an Indigenous Voice to Parliament in 2023. In 2017 the Seventeenth Session of General Synod passed a motion expressing support “for a constitutionally-entrenched First Nations’ Voice to the Commonwealth Parliament. Subsequently a number of Dioceses, agencies and individual clergy and laity added their support to the ‘Yes’ campaign; I particularly want to acknowledge the efforts of First Nations leaders among us noting that your advocacy was not without cost. Nonetheless my impression is that the support of the churches for this proposal was neither as unequivocal nor as enthusiastic as it was for example in the 1967 Referendum.

I personally regard the outcome of the referendum as a missed opportunity for our nation in its journey towards reconciliation but it is not my intention to engage in a detailed analysis of the result. To some extent it may have been inevitable once the debate became primarily about general principles that were understood to be in conflict with each other (e.g. equality before the law versus recognition of difference) rather than about the particular shape of our national story and how that might be acknowledged.

Over the past four years General Synod Standing Committee has listened to the voice of our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander sisters and brothers as expressed through the National Aboriginal And Torres Strait Islander Anglican Council (NATSIAC). They have communicated that their immediate priority is not structural change but practical support for the ministry of First Nations Christians, especially clergy.

Christian leadership is always taxing but there are particular challenges experienced by First Nations ministers. These include a lack of financial resources which means that ministry often needs to be self-supporting in full or in part. This generosity in ministry has been exemplified by Bishop Chris McLeod, who for the past eleven years has served as National Aboriginal Bishop alongside other ministry responsibilities including most recently as Dean of St Peter’s Cathedral Adelaide. This will be Chris’ last General Synod with us in this capacity and I am sure you will joining with me in thanking God and thanking him.

Later in our gathering we will consider legislative changes that will allow for the appointment of a National Aboriginal Bishop and a National Torres Strait Islander Bishop as Bishops Assisting the Primate and a Budget that supports the appointment

of a full-time National Aboriginal Bishop. I encourage us to consider these initiatives as next steps in an unfolding journey of partnership rather than as ends in themselves and to pray for those who God will be calling to serve in these roles in God's time.

Viability of Rural and Regional Dioceses

One of the results of Australia's particular demography and geography is that compared to countries like England, the United States and Aotearoa/New Zealand is that our Anglican Dioceses differ radically in size. Moreover it is often the geographically larger Dioceses which have the smaller or more dispersed populations; this creates obvious problems for sustaining ministry especially in the absence of financial and other resources that can be allocated centrally.

You will be well aware of the particular difficulties experienced by the Diocese of North Queensland which saw it enter into receivership in August last year. Please pray for Bishop Keith and the Diocese as they work with the receivers to chart a way forward that will ensure that all redress claims are met and ministry and mission sustained into the future. Sadly this will involve the sale of a number of church properties; it is right that we grieve with those who are grieving the loss of buildings which have served as 'storehouses' of memory even as we affirm that the work of God cannot be confined to physical structures.

More broadly sustaining ministry in all parts of our nation is vital not just for the sake of those who live there but because of the ways in which God so often brings renewal to His people 'from the edges' as it were. It was in the Diocese of Carpentaria (now part of the Diocese of North Queensland) that The Reverends Poey Passi and Joseph Lui were ordained as the first Torres Strait Islander priests in 1925 and The Reverend Patrick Brisbane was ordained as the first Aboriginal priest in 1970.

The Standing Committee Report outlines the work that has gone into investigating possible legislative changes to allow for more early and co-ordinated responses to Dioceses in financial difficulty. Broadly speaking the outcome of that process has been to clarify that more progress will be made through developing culture rather than reforming structures. In Galatians 6:2-5 St Paul urges believers both to "bear one another's burdens" and to "carry out their own loads." Working out this dual call at the ecclesial level will remain a priority in the coming years.

Practising Safe Ministry

Next year, it will be a decade since the release of the final report of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. That report was both a sobering accounting of our past failures and an impetus to further develop safe ministry reforms that were already under way.

Subsequent years have seen the adoption of national legislation in areas such as *Safe Ministry to Children, Redress for Survivors of Abuse* and the maintenance of a National Register. Dioceses have also implemented policies for ministry well-being and development, including mandated supervision, professional development and ministry review requirements for clergy and other authorised ministers.

Still, I am keenly aware of the potential for us to become “weary in doing good” in this particular area. In this regard I note a recent release from the National Church Life Survey (based on 2021 data) which found that since 2016 a growing percentage of church attenders reporting that sexual abuse by clergy had damaged their confidence in church authorities and a growing awareness that the church is taking appropriate steps to meet its responsibilities¹¹. I expect this same pattern of damaged confidence/growing awareness would be replicated amongst non-church-going Australians, which is one reason among many to keep at it. This is important work with significant pastoral and missional implications.

In this General Synod we will be giving particular attention to changes to Episcopal Standards legislation. You will note that the particular priority given to holding Diocesan Bishops accountable for their actions or inactions in ensuring safe ministry policies and procedures are followed.

Over the past four years the Family and Culture Commission has done sterling work to ensure our churches are safe places for victims and survivors of family violence. Please join with me in thanking them, and National Project manager The Reverend Tracy Lauersen for all they have done. I acknowledge that many dioceses, parishes and agencies have formally adopted the Ten Commitments for Prevention and Response to Domestic and Family Violence in the Anglican Church of Australia¹² and encourage them to ensure these commitments are embedded in best practice which is regularly reviewed.

Living in a Conflicted World

Four years ago General Synod passed a resolution deploring “the clear and flagrant breach by the Russian government invading Ukraine and also the crimes against humanity and war crimes and have been and are being allegedly being committed there.” It is a grief and a tragedy that as we gather that war still awaits a just and lasting peace. To this we can add the devastation in Gaza and Lebanon, the ongoing hostilities between the United States and Iran and lesser-reported but still horrific conflicts in Sudan, Myanmar and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Of course, all these countries are home to Christian, and in some instances Anglican communities.

¹¹ The full report can be downloaded at <https://shop.ncls.org.au/products/safeguarding-in-australian-churches>

¹² <https://www.tencommitments.org.au/ten-commitments-overview>

In our region there is an ongoing struggle for influence involving Australia, China the United States and other actors with a heightened potential for military confrontation.

All of the above is reason for prayer, for supporting the vital and timely ministry of our Defence Force Chaplains and for considering how our church and the church more widely might contribute to the well-being of our nearest neighbours out of a spirit of generosity rather than competition. As a Rugby League fan I note with interest the plans for the Papua New Guinea Chiefs are to enter the NRL as the competition's 18th franchise in 2028. While sport is undoubtedly a positive contributor to any social fabric, I venture that a well-resourced Christian community has even more to offer.

Hope for Anglicanism

Earlier this year I attended both the installation of Archbishop Sarah Mullally as the 106th and first female Archbishop of Canterbury and (together with my wife Monica and Mrs Juliet Wenden) FONO, an annual gathering of Primates and General Secretaries from Anglican Churches in Oceania. I was honoured to represent the Anglican Church of Australia on both occasions. The first was grand and highlighted the worldwide reach of Anglicanism; the latter was more intimate but allowed greater scope for fellowship and understanding. In particular we were able to identify some areas for potential collaboration, including partnerships in theological education and a joint approach to the Governments of New Zealand and Australia to ensure that the labour mobility schemes in both countries are more accommodating of the pastoral and spiritual needs of workers from the Pacific.

Perhaps there is a pointer here to a future for worldwide Anglicanism that is more decentralised and affirming of leadership and initiative from multiple locations and at multiple levels. It is also worth considering how some of our more prominent structures may recover their vitality as instruments of communion where common faith and order is strengthened through counsel, discussion and debate rather than as expressions of communion where various positions are signalled through attendance and engagement, or alternatively non-attendance and disengagement. The Nairobi-Cairo Proposals considered at the recent meeting of the Anglican Consultative Council sought to chart some ways forward here, in the light of continuing disagreements over how our common faith should be expressed particularly in the area of human sexuality. Such honesty about present realities is, I believe, a necessary prerequisite for moving forward and I hope the Proposals receive further sympathetic engagement and refining over the next three years.

Still, I have hope for our Communion. At the same meeting the ACC gave its endorsement to Vision36, an initiative to plant and revitalise one million churches over the next decade. Later in our gathering we will have an opportunity to consider and commend this initiative in our life together. As with all such ventures, it will only flourish as it is adopted and adapted with the local context in mind, and as God is

pleased to work through our faltering efforts for His Glory, for the growth of the church and for the salvation of many.

So, I have hope too for the Anglican Church of Australia. As I read through past Primatial addresses I noted that several referred to our dispersed structures whereby significant autonomy is granted to Dioceses. Rather than something to be lamented, this may be part of what it means for us to be a National Church, one which inhabits and is to some extent shaped by its host culture. Still, there is always a danger of emphasising autonomy at the expense of responsibility and mutual accountability. Our common responsibility is to make Christ known in this time and place, and accountability is expressed as we take time to consider how we can do so consistent with the constitutional and legislative frameworks to which we have committed ourselves.

Ending in Hope

“Hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” Paul’s words from Romans 5 are intriguing. Given that hope is forward looking we might expect him to say that hope *will* not put us to shame (or disappoint us as in some other translations). Clearly, he assumes that there is something about the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer which brings God’s future into the present.

Throughout history Christians have experienced the presence of God’s Spirit in myriad ways – through prayer and worship, through words of encouragement and acts of service. Synods may not have been chief among them but if we are the Body of Christ brought together for a time we confess and believe that God’s Spirit is with us. Amidst the busyness of all that needs to be done let’s take time to notice and acknowledge that God is here and that God is at work. You might find it helpful to end each day with a reflection on where you have encountered God – through a new insight, an encouraging conversation or simply the awareness that in company with others you have done God’s work as God’s Spirit enabled.

Please pray with me:

Almighty and everliving God,

Give wisdom and understanding

To the members of this General of our Church.

Teach us in all things

To seek first your honour and glory.

May we perceive what is right

Have courage to pursue it

And grace to accomplish it,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

NOTE

All Bible references are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVUE)