

A New Openness to Change

John Harrower¹ in *'Facing the Future (of the Anglican Church in Australia): Bishops Imagine a Different Church'* edited by S. Hale & A. Curnow, Acorn Press, Brunswick East, 2009, Chapter 20. [Book here](#).

There is no doubt in our minds that a **new openness to change** is evident within the Anglican Church of Australia. Two decades of National Church Life Surveys (NCLS) have provided a shocking reality check grimly detailing our critical decline. Many of us have taken these and similar challenges seriously. The key question is whether this is a new openness to deep change that will bring new life, or simply tolerable minor adjustments that are only making slow death more palatable.

In the words of Quinn and Caza, 'deep change is transformational change.'² The evidence of an openness to transformational change is found where leaders are stepping out of institutionalised culture where protecting the *status quo* has been paramount, to refocus on the church's biblical mandate as God's mission agency. These leaders are committed to the reality that 'We are not in the business of institutionalising mission; we are in the business of liberating the people of God for mission.'³

In 1997, Bishop Phillip Newell, reflecting on the NCLS 1996 survey results for the Anglican Church in Tasmania wrote, 'What stands out with clarity is that merely trying to do what we did in the past only better, working harder, pedalling faster, has not turned the ship around. It has, if anything fuelled the sense of frustration and failure in our clergy and lay leadership. We need a different way of being church.'⁴

As a result, over the years 1998 and 1999, the diocese began to put in place a model of ministry based on Paul's metaphor of the Body of Christ from Ephesians chapter 4. The council of the diocese endorsed a vision of 'Every congregation and organisation participating in the mission of God by being a ministering community in which needs are discerned and ministries are identified, called and used.'

In Tasmania in 2000, the question was asked, 'Bishop, what would you like from the diocese as you commence your episcopate?' – The answer, 'A website for the diocese.' The diocese obliged. A new openness to change was evident. However, the much deeper challenge came when the bishop shared the vision of 'Every Tasmanian committed to Jesus Christ', declared that the diocese be known as 'The Missionary Diocese of Tasmania', and challenged every Anglican to live as a 'missionary disciple'. These strong statements of missional intent highlighted the commencement of intentional deep change in the Anglican Church in Tasmania.

¹ John Harrower is Bishop of Tasmania. He is grateful to Paul Cavanough, Director of Ministry in the Diocese of Tasmania, for his contribution to both the writing of this chapter and the nurture of its possibilities.

² R.E. Quinn & A. Caza, 'Deep Change', in *Encyclopaedia of Leadership*, Eds. G.R. Goethals, G. Sorenson & J. M. Burns, Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks CA, 2004, p. 326

³ George Carey, 1996 'Looking to the Future' [Archbishop of Canterbury: Presidential Address at ACC-10](#) <http://www.anglicancommunion.org/acns/news.cfm/1996/10/30/ACNS1007>.

⁴ The Tasmanian Anglican August 1997 p.2.

We hope that reflecting on a decade of change in the Tasmanian context will be useful. Tasmania is an island state of Australia with a population of 500,000. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the population centres are greater Hobart (207,000), greater Launceston (104,000) and Burnie/Devonport (80,000), with the remainder of the population spread in smaller towns and rural districts across the state.⁵ The population pattern has resulted from geographical, historical and commercial factors that have led to a large number of small but significant centres developing across the state. The Anglican Church also has strong links to the development of the state. In the ABS 2006 Census some 160,000 Tasmanians declared themselves to be Anglican. Sadly, only 3,000 of them would find themselves in Anglican worship centres on any Sunday morning. The nineteenth-century mission strategy to have a church building and priest within easy walking distance of every Anglican has left a legacy of church buildings and parishes scattered across the state. Following some rationalisation, there are now currently 50 parishes with 139 worship centres in active use. The decade of evangelism in the 1990s saw church attendance in Tasmania decline by 30 per cent. The Anglican Church faced critical decline.

One mark of an openness to change is the openness to a different kind of leadership. The mood of the diocese at the end of the decade of evangelism was best described as highly anxious with very low levels of understanding of how to address the reality of critical decline. At this time the diocese needed to call a new bishop. A deeply conservative community faced the stark reality of ‘change or death?’ They needed a bishop with a commitment to mission and evangelism, and a proven capacity to grow the church. Tasmania prayed for and called a missionary bishop. This bishop had a vision for the Anglican Church to be a healthy church transforming the lives of every Tasmanian, and for every Anglican person to be a prayerful activist, enlivened by biblical faith and the power of the Holy Spirit. At his first synod in October 2000, he concluded his Presidential Address by declaring,

You elected me, trust me.
You elected a missionary, let us be missionaries together.
You elected an innovator, let us be innovators together.
You elected a change agent, let us change together.
You elected a missionary bishop, let us be a missionary diocese.⁶

This declaration was met by a standing ovation from synod, leaving the bishop in tears. The diocese was clearly warming to their new leadership.

Another mark of openness to change is leaders who are willing to take risks. The new bishop’s slogan for the diocese ‘All Tasmanians committed to Jesus Christ’ clearly expressed his commitment to deep and transformational change. Obviously, if every Tasmanian was to know of Jesus Christ a lot needed to change in the Anglican Church. An organisational environment of high levels of anxiety and low levels of understanding is not conducive to strategic planning. Some said that the church needed entrepreneurial leadership, but we preferred to see it as spiritual leadership, ‘knowing where God wants people to be and taking the initiative to use God’s methods to get them there in reliance

⁵ ABS, *Tasmania at a Glance*, Commonwealth of Australia, 2008, p. 2.

⁶ J. Harrower, ‘Reaching Tasmanians for Jesus Christ’, 2000 Tasmanian Synod Keynote Address, Anglican Church in Tasmania, 27 October 2000, www.anglicantas.org.au/resources-synodaddress2000/.

on God's power.⁷ We decided to leverage every piece of episcopal authority toward these priorities.

This environment demanded and allowed careful but decisive action to **address critical and urgent matters**. We 'cleaned the cupboards', to deal with the potentially crippling issue of child sexual abuse by Anglican church workers. This involved a public apology to victims at the new bishop's first media conference, developing a Pastoral Support and Assistance Scheme, the bishop making himself available to meet pastorally with victims and to personally apologise to them, the use of diocesan funds to finance the pastoral support, and the active media presence of the bishop in seeking to make our complaint processes and pastoral care transparent.

We took every opportunity to embed a missional ecclesiology in diocesan life. The diocese had for some time been considering the seminal work of twentieth-century missiologist Roland Allen who said,

St Paul's churches were indigenous churches in the proper sense of the word; and I believe that the secret of their foundation lay in his recognition of the church as a local church (as opposed to our 'national churches') and in his profound belief and trust in the Holy Spirit indwelling his converts and the churches of which they were members, which enabled him to establish them at once with full authority.⁸

We believed that transformational change could be built on this same trust. Permission giving is a sign of openness to change, and it needed to be a characteristic of our diocese. If the bishop could not trust his clergy and lay leaders, then we were doomed.

The missiology of Roland Allen was foundational to our establishing a pattern of parish life known as Enabler Supported Ministry. Parishes who could no longer afford reasonable levels of stipendiary ministry, yet sustained a heart for ministry and mission in their districts, would be enabled to continue in full ministry. The priority was to sustain the mission of the church rather than institutional guidelines or inherited structures.

'Permission giving' in our diocese saw the bishop delegate new authorities to rectors. This included the conduct of weddings, funerals, baptisms and worship services in non-consecrated buildings; determinations with regard to the marriage of divorced persons; the development of ecumenical partnerships; the licensing of lay workers; and the use of new liturgies to respectfully reflect the culture of the people to whom we were seeking to minister more fully. This type of change was not easy for some to whom it appeared to be a sure course for chaos and disaster. Recruitment of clergy and lay leadership became, and continues to be, an extremely high priority. Some who simply could not or would not come onboard with the bishop's vision left the diocese or the Anglican Church. We needed to accept these decisions as health-giving for both parties.

In a very mixed and dysfunctional environment, the focus had to be on missiology. There is much that divides us. The hope is that the mission of God would unite us. Within two years, the diocese became the Missionary Diocese of Tasmania, the bishop became the Missionary Bishop, archdeacons became Mission Support Officers, archdeaconries

⁷ J. Piper, *The Marks of a Spiritual Leader*, Desiring God Resource Library, 1 January 1995, viewed 15 August 2009, <http://www.desiringgod.org/ResouceLibrary/Articles/ByDate/1995/1575>.

⁸ Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?*, author's preface to 2nd edn, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids MI, 1962, p. vii.

became Mission Networks, the Diocesan Ministry Officer became the Diocesan Mission Enabler, bishop's visits included mission conversations, and parish priorities became Mission Action Plans. There is no doubt that we could be accused of overkill, and in many ways we under-delivered; however, no one could say our intention was not clear!

The Mission Conversations became a central strategy in moving the diocese toward deeper levels of understanding. It was a simple idea, really: bring the lay and clerical leadership of clusters of parishes together to talk about mission and their role in the work of God in their patch. We found that many Anglicans simply did not have the language of mission and were deeply fearful of evangelism. Many were ashamed of a perceived personal failure to keep their own children and grandchildren in the life of the church. Others were profoundly ashamed of the abusive behaviour of some clergy. Many had lost confidence in the gospel and the work of God in the world. This church needed to be lovingly re-taught not to be afraid but to trust God and each other. At our mission conversations we would talk about the things that we could see God doing in our lives and in the church. As we told stories we came to understand that God was at work through us in our homes and communities. We also managed to gather a few ideas of how we could get closer to God and to participate in his work in our communities.

The appointment of Mission Support Officers began a critical rethink of the role of the bishop's support team. These offices needed to enhance the missional agenda. We decided to move many of the traditional responsibilities for property and management matters from archdeacons to the Registrar. Mission Support Officers were then released from some of the burden of line-management to focus on supporting local mission. This action was one of the earliest in our intent to reshape and integrate institutional structures to facilitate a 'missionary diocese'.

We aim to facilitate the consideration of missional priorities at every level within the diocese. For example, a missionary diocese must have a synod that facilitates mission, but the same must apply at every level. We challenged the diocesan council, the ministry council, Anglicare (Tasmania), our schools and our agencies to critically re-examine their missional agenda.

Monitoring the mood or climate of the diocese has been essential in adjusting the pace of change. Our aim has been to lower levels of anxiety and raise the levels of understanding to the point at which it is possible to undertake significant strategic planning. However, it is essential to lead the diocese knowing its reality. We refused to take the 'she'll be right approach', or worse still, to hyper-spiritualise our situation by not balancing faith with appropriate action. In very general terms, an environment of high levels of anxiety about the future of the church, with very low levels of understanding of how to address the issues, is an ideal environment for the entrepreneurial strike. In this environment we were able to move very quickly to establish new mission works. The office of the bishop was able to bless and release evangelists to seniors' ministry, sailing ministry and family outreach using donkeys.⁹

As anxiety levels lowered and understanding grew, we were asked to explain our vision for the diocese. People had begun to see that the future might look very different to the

⁹ Gayelene Harrower trains donkeys for church and community events as a way of sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. Gayelene's donkeys have appeared in Cathedrals, parishes, street parades and community events offering 'living stables' and rides explaining the cross on the donkey's back and the One who rode them in love for us.

past. In 2004 the Bishop released his vision for the diocese entitled ‘a healthy church ... transforming life’.¹⁰ It is important to note that this was not a diocesan vision. We made no attempt to gain diocesan-wide consensus on a vision. It simply would have taken too long. The bishop encouraged each parish with seven principles:

We will embark on an ambitious plan to transform the life of the Anglican Church in Tasmania over the coming years. The heart of strategic planning within a church is our relationship with God. Therefore our work is a spiritual process.

Seven principles should guide this work:

1. Be faithful to our relationship with God and one another.
2. Develop and implement plans at every place of calling and responsibility.
3. Examine every aspect (theology, demographics, economics, etc) of our diocesan community and propose plans that reflect these realities.
4. Think big and do not be afraid to take risks and ask big and difficult questions.
5. Listen to one another with open minds and un-defending hearts.
6. Explore and identify the relationships and resources essential to carrying out our ministries.
7. Invite broad and open contributions to the process.¹¹

This process was supported by Anglicare (Tasmania) distributing, and the diocese providing training in, the *Mission Action Planning* kit authored by Stuart Robinson (Evangelism Ministries), Cheryl Smith and Michael Wilson (Strategic Ministries, Anglicare).¹²

We have been encouraged by the reaction to this process. Several parishes have developed sophisticated strategic plans. In fact, it has become obvious that if we are serious about the Roland Allen principle to recognise the local church as the primary mission agency, then it is not necessary to develop a shared diocesan-wide strategic plan. Instead, we have moved to the development of a Diocesan Council Mission Action Plan.¹³ This document describes the priorities over three years of the bishop’s senior team and the diocesan council. The plan describes a very significant review of our primary diocesan structures. We will consider, through conversation, a restructuring of our parish system.

The approach is to continually increase understanding and lower anxiety levels. As these two goals are achieved, we will have an environment which is much more conducive to significant change. We have often run a long way ahead of the capacity of individual parishes to respond. There has been tension and debate, but we are moving in the right direction.

¹⁰ J. Harrower, ‘ahealthychurch ... transforming life: The Bishop’s Vision for the Missionary Diocese of Tasmania’, Anglican Church in Tasmania, February 2004, www.anglicantas.org.au/.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 22.

¹² Stuart Robinson, Cheryl Smith & Michael Wilson, *Mission Action Planning: The M.A.P. – For Churches and Organisations in the 21st Century*, Anglicare, Evangelism Ministries, Anglican Diocese of Sydney, 2005.

¹³ ‘Mission Action Plan July 2008’, Missionary Diocese of Tasmania, <http://www.anglicantas.org.au/map/>.

Many readers will realise that within Anglican polity, the diocesan bishop has very little power other than persuasive influence. However, it is possible, and very effective, to stimulate change through modelling key principles. By way of example, the diocesan bishop has undertaken three external reviews of his work and performance, and each of these reviews has been made public. Each of the senior staff has undertaken similar reviews. As a result, we believe that we have slowly built a good culture of review within the diocese. Not all are ready to submit to a formal process, but we are certainly able to talk about the issues of continuous ministry review and professional development. We have also undertaken reviews of key ministries that we have developed, and in particular, enabler-supported ministry.

We have not underestimated the difficulty of transforming local parishes. At times we have been extremely exasperated with what we have felt to be a very slow pace of change, and this has been most frustrating in the light of our hope to develop many ‘fresh expressions’ of our life together. In the light of these experiences, we felt that we had to find a new way to develop these ministries in Tasmania. In what has become known as ‘The Imagine Project’¹⁴ we found a way in 2008 to establish diocesan-based rather than parish-based fresh expressions.

The Imagine Project is a three-year trial involving three local mission projects under the supervision of specially appointed bishops: a missionary bishop for projects and training, and another for stewardship. The appointment of missionary bishops has appeared as an extraordinary step by many. However, we believe that it is absolutely necessary for us to rediscover the primary missional or apostolic role of a bishop in the life of the church.

We hope that you find this brief account of our missionary diocese of interest. We now have a missionary bishop, two missionary bishops, six mission support officers, a mission action plan and hundreds of Tasmanian Anglicans who would claim to be missionary disciples. We have a long way to go. Change is never easy. It is our simple hope that the heart and hands of our missionary diocese bear a sign of an openness to change.

This chapter would not be complete if we did not turn to prayer – Our bishop’s ‘Prayer for transforming life’,

- Transforming God, as we meet together
fill us with your wisdom.
Give us the capacity to work
boldly and with humility,
embracing the challenge of mission.
Use us to bring transforming life
to our Christian Communities
and to all Tasmanians.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

¹⁴ This is a reference to Ephesians 3:20, ‘[Our God] who ... is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we could ask or imagine ...’