

Towards an Australian Anglican Ecclesiology

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Preamble

The parish is the geographical unit for organizing the mission of God throughout the Anglican Church within the Diocese of Melbourne. The boundaries of each parish are those approved by the Archbishop in Council. The Anglican Church within the Diocese is constituted of clergy and lay people committed to building up the body of Christ under the leadership of the Archbishop. *Parish Governance Act 2013* s 5.

The historic origins of the Anglican Church of Australia in the Church of England, bequeath a parochial system of church organization and governance. As Bruce Kaye notes, 'it is indisputably the case' that system inherited from the Church of England by the Australian church was overwhelmingly parochial in terms of organization and local in character.¹ This is assumed in the *Parish Governance Act 2013*, not only in the preamble cited above from section 5, but in the various instruments and formularies throughout.

1. Theological considerations

The term used most frequently in the New Testament to describe what we would today call 'the church' is *ekklesia*, meaning 'the called out ones.' The *ekklesia* is comprised of those called out of 'the world' by profession of faith in Jesus Christ, and is found in the assembly thereof. Frequently, the *ekklesia* is defined geographically – e.g. the *ekklesia* in Corinth, the *ekklesia* in Galatia, etc. As a term, and like most words, *ekklesia* is, in itself, incapable of capturing the fullness of the theological meaning of the church as it emerges in the Scriptures. A variety of additional metaphorical imagery – examples of which are the Body of Christ, the Temple of God, the Bride of Christ – is employed throughout the New Testament to express what it means to be the 'called out' and 'assembled' people of God. Sometimes the imagery is universal, of all Christian people expressing allegiance to Christ, and sometimes localized. The English word church (like its Greek antecedent *ekklesia*) is capable of being used in both senses. From the very beginning, the followers of Christ met to 'break bread' and experience Christ as, in some way, present with them (Acts 2.43-47). This central act, or rite, is called by St Paul (1 Cor 10.16) 'communion' (*koinonia*). Communion may describe both the fellowship of Christian people vertically, with Christ, and horizontally, with each other. Communion (*koinonia*) is capable, then, of giving expression to the fullness of the Christian understanding of the church, both in terms of its essence and praxis. For this reason, the term 'community' is used of the *ekklesia* by Karl Barth through the course of his volume on ecclesiology in the *Church Dogmatics* (Vol. IV, Part 3.2).

¹ *A Church Without Walls: Being Anglican in Australia* (Melbourne: Dove, 1995), p. 155.

From the very outset Jesus Christ did not envisage individual followers, disciples and witnesses but a plurality of such united by Him both with Himself and with one another... He places them in His community... the communion of saints.²

Robert Warren, drawing on the succinct definition of (then Archbishop of Canterbury) Rowan Williams that 'church is what happens when the impact of Christ on a situation brings two or more people together,' enlarges on this to posit a communion centered definition that takes us away from the traditional model of 'Church = Building + Priest + Sunday Services.'³

Church is essentially a community of people drawn together by faith in and encounter with Jesus Christ as Lord, which leads them to take action in the whole of life, living by a different set of values from that would otherwise have been the case.⁴

There is nothing explicit in the New Testament to suggest that the Christian community called into existence by Jesus Christ was commenced with the threefold order of Bishops, Priests and Deacons, nor with a system of geographical organisation - although the communities in which the church had its locus were geographically defined entities - e.g. the church of Corinth, the church in Galatia, etc.

This means that the church is not defined by its ministerial structures; it is defined by its communal existence given by God in Christ, and by the presence of the Spirit who provides the leaders needed.⁵

From the beginning, in the apostolic age and in the pages of the New Testament itself (especially the Pastoral Epistles), there is, however, evidence of internal organization, together with a process of institutionalization, that crystallises in the geographically defined structure of communities gathered around a local *episkopos*. This is already present in the time of Ignatius (early Second Century CE).

See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as you would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God. Let no man do anything connected with the Church without the bishop. Let that be deemed a proper Eucharist,

² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. IV, Part 3.2, The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (eds. G.W. Bromiley & T.F. Torrance; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), pp. 681-82. This is consistent with the practical exposition, by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of the church as *Life Together* (1939).

³ Robert Warren, *The Healthy Churches Handbook* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), p. 83.

⁴ Warren, *The Healthy Churches Handbook*, p. 85.

⁵ Kevin Giles, *What on Earth is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Melbourne: Dove, 1995), p. 187.

which is administered either by the bishop, or by one to whom he has entrusted it. Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude of the people also be; even as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church (Ignatius, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 8).

Thus the tradition, very early in the apostolic age, bequeaths the structural concept of the church as a community gathered around its *episkopos* (bishop). The claim of the Book of Common Prayer is:

It is evident unto all men diligently reading holy Scripture and ancient Authors, that from the Apostle's time there have been these Orders of Ministers in Christ's Church; Bishops, Priests, and Deacons (*Ordinal*).

The Scriptures further speak of the church in much broader terms, as being comprised of, not only all of the baptized in a particular locality, but of all the baptized everywhere, transcending even time and space, and crossing even that barrier between life and death. Anglican ecclesiology gives expression to this by recognizing that the church is manifest on multiple levels – that there is, at the same time, a church transcending earth itself, a universal (or catholic) church consisting of all the baptised on earth; that there are within this also national and denominational churches, of which the Anglican Church is itself one; and that within the Anglican Church of Australia there are distinct geographical units, both of the diocese and the parish. When speaking of, and referring to, the parish, it is the geographical area that is meant, not the worshipping congregation or congregations therein.

When they are thinking ecclesologically, Anglicans do not think of the gathered congregation as the fundamental unit of the Church, but of the diocese as the local church, comprising all the parishes within which the clergy exercise a ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care that is commissioned and overseen by the bishop.⁶

This is consistent with Article XIX, *Of the Church*, that the Church of Christ exists where 'the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments duly administered.' The structure of parochial organisation, together with episcopal leadership, has direct relevance to mission. Paul Avis explains:

The Church's mission is to all. Anglicanism can never be a sect. The Church of England is a territorial church and embraces all within its parishes who do not refuse its ministry. Its ethos is essentially inclusive, not exclusive.⁷

Richard Giles agrees:

⁶ Paul Avis, *The Anglican Understanding of the Church* (London: SPCK, 2nd edn, 2013), p. 84.

⁷ *The Anglican Understanding of the Church*, p. 45.

Under the direction of its parish priest, every parish church has an apostolic commission to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the people God has put in their patch. This is a great privilege.⁸

The calling, and gathering, of individual believers into community has, then, both a pastoral and a missional purpose.

The Christian community exists as called into existence and maintained in existence by Jesus Christ as the people of His witness, bound, engaged and committed to Him... Called out of the world, the community is genuinely called into it.⁹

To be a parish church, a church must find a community and locate itself within it, incarnating the life of God there in ways that are both local and catholic.¹⁰

2. Fresh Expressions and the 'Mixed Economy'

Looking back over its long history, the Church of England, via the compilers of its 'Mission-Shaped Church' report, understand the development of the parish system to be the appropriate historical response to the situation of the ancient and Medieval Church.

The missionary advance of Christianity has always involved the crossing of cultures and developing skills of translation... A church which has grasped this principle actively seeks ways to embody the gospel in ways of life, service and worship which are locally appropriate. Their primary concern is to embody Jesus (to be the body of Christ) within the local culture or cultures.¹¹

Recognising that the existing structures were now insufficient to meet the missional priorities of the early 21st Century, the Church of England (in England), under the leadership of then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, introduced the notion of the 'mixed economy' church.

⁸ *How to be an Anglican* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2003), p. 48.

⁹ Barth, *Church Dogmatics, Vol. IV, Part 3.2*, pp. 752, 764.

¹⁰ Martyn Percy, 'Many Rooms in my Father's House: The Changing Identity of the English Parish Church,' in *The Future of the Parish System: Shaping the Church of England for the Twenty-First Century* (ed. Stephen Croft; London: Church House Publishing, 2006), p. 14.

¹¹ Graham Cray, 'Focusing Church Life on a Theology of Mission,' in *The Future of the Parish System: Shaping the Church of England for the Twenty-First Century* (ed. Stephen Croft; London: Church House Publishing, 2006), p. 66.

It was a view echoed by the Australian General Synod in 2004 (see Resolution 67/04). The mixed economy is essentially a church comprised of any number of forms or expressions.¹²

In the same year the Diocese of Melbourne adopted the *Authorised Anglican Congregations Act 2004*. The Act, in s 4(1), requires that an authorised congregation not be synonymous with the congregation of an existing parish, be led by a licensed priest, and ‘worship as an Anglican congregation.’

The advent of Fresh Expressions, as vital and important as it is, does not announce the end of the traditional parish system of church organization. Archdeacon Bob Jackson, in his influential *Hope for the Church*, argues for a ‘both/and’ approach, which seeks to combine the best of both the ‘parochial’ and the ‘gathered’ church models.

For centuries, Christians have argued about whether the church should be a gathered community of faith or an organism with no real membership boundaries committed to the care of all... However, perhaps this debate has now run its full course and needs to be laid to rest. What has happened, as much by default as design, is that each side has recognized the strength of the practice and argument of the other, and has adjusted its own practice accordingly. Today there are few ‘gathered’ churches that do not have a clear sense of calling to be involved in and to serve the communities around the church. Equally, even Anglican churches with a strong sense of their civic role have a sense of coming together to be nourished in the faith as a loving community of believers... An exclusive emphasis on either ‘gathered’ or ‘parish’ is seen as odd or unhealthy.¹³

In publications as diverse as Bob Jackson’s *Hope for the Church* (above) and his subsequent *The Road to Growth*, the Australian General Synod’s *Building the Mission Shaped Church in Australia*, and the Church of England’s *Mission-Shaped Parish: Traditional Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009), the traditional entities of the parish, the diocese, and the cathedral church, are recognized as valued instruments of the mission of the church, albeit in need of ongoing transformation by the Spirit.

The parish system of England, which was in place at the birth of the Anglican movement, was a mission response to the cultures of its day. And in holding fast to the parish system as part of its life, the Church of England has built on a mission foundation. Commitment to the parish system is commitment to mission; there is no theological room in it for the idea that the Church is just there to chaplain its own... There is no

¹² Alan Nichols (Ed), *Building the Mission-Shaped Church in Australia* (Sydney: The General Synod Office, The Anglican Church of Australia, 2006), p. 2.

¹³ Bob Jackson, *Hope for the Church: Contemporary Strategies for Growth* (London: Church House Publishing, 2002), p. 58.

doubt that as a mission narrative the parish system has served the Church of England well. We build on it still, and we should.¹⁴

Thus, whilst the advent of Fresh Expressions of church at one level might appear to threaten the very existence of the parish church, at another level, it might in fact be the savior of the parish, by complimenting the practice of parochial ministry with an emphasis on mission and enabling the building and establishment of new, extra-parochial, faith communities supplementary to that of the parish. From this standpoint, a dual focus, or 'mixed economy' of church is required for the future, both at parish, diocesan, and national level.

In this picture of the contemporary Church it is an aeroplane struggling to stay aloft with only one wing, spiraling downwards and widely expected to crash out of control. The one wing it has is the traditional, inherited model of church – a proper liturgy in a proper building with proper clergy at the proper time on the proper day. The wing it is lacking is the 'fresh expressions' wing of new styles and concepts of church suited to the variety of people and life-styles in the postmodern world. The task today is to construct the other wing in mid flight before the plane crashes.¹⁵

3. An Australian Ecclesiology

As Tom Frame states at the beginning of his *Anglicans in Australia*:

The Anglican Church of Australia is not a newly created or fashioned stand-alone religious entity. It is descended directly from the Church of England, which has claimed historical continuity with the teaching and mission of Jesus Christ and the undivided Christian Church of apostolic antiquity. Understanding 'Australian Anglicanism' is impossible without some knowledge of the conflicts and challenges that gave the Church of England its organizational architecture and corporate ethos, two things that have given outward form and inner substance to the Anglican Church of Australia.¹⁶

The Anglican church arrived in Australia initially in the form of a military chaplaincy with the first penal settlement. It did not take long, of course, for the instruments of the 'established church' to be rapidly transplanted from England, and for the parish system to be replicated in Australia. As the colonies expanded and grew, so too did the Anglican presence. Nonetheless, the Church of England in Australia was never established by law in the same way that is the case in the United Kingdom. Bruce Kaye claims that, having adopted the parochial system uncritically from its English origins, 'the question of the development of an

¹⁴ Paul Hayes et al, *Mission-Shaped Parish: Traditional Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009), p. 17,

¹⁵ Bob Jackson, *The road to Growth: Towards a Thriving Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2005), p. 78.

¹⁶ Tom Frame, *Anglicans in Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2007), p. 23.

appropriate model for ecclesiology in a plural and non-ecclesiastic society such as Australia has been a continuing theme in the history of the Anglican Church of Australia.¹⁷ In his influential *A Church Without Walls* Kaye argues strongly for a 'church in society' and 'incarnational model' of Anglican ecclesial expression. Whilst acknowledging that we tend to act locally and think missiologically in terms of the parish, he does not equate the incarnational model with the parochial structure, but argues for something more fluid than this.¹⁸ Although writing before its advent was being fully realized, he seems to point inexorably, in fact, in the direction of 'fresh expressions.'

The inheritance of the Anglican Church of Australia is that of a parochial system, embedded in a local community, and exercising an 'incarnational model of ministry' (Kaye). The parish has always been complemented, both in England and in Australia, by other, equally valid, models and forms of ministry, exercising an incarnational ministry to a variety of communities, alongside that of the parish. These have, and continue to, include a range of chaplaincies, social agencies, monastic communities, and, in more recent years, multicultural communities, and now 'fresh expressions' of church, some embedded in existing parishes and some not. Since 2004 the Diocese of Melbourne has legislated for 'Authorised congregations' that are not parishes in a geographical sense, but retain through legislation the rights and obligations of parishes. Thus, there is now present in the Diocese of Melbourne (and across Australia in general), a 'mixed economy' of church incorporating and embracing both the historical models inherited from the Church of England, together with some more contemporary expressions of church. This 'mixed economy' of church must be understood with reference to the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia.

The 'Fundamental Declarations' of the Constitution (sections 1-3), identify the Anglican Church of Australia as part of the 'One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church of Christ' and affirm the threefold order of bishops, priests and deacons.' The 'Ruling Principles' (section 4) further state that:

This Church, being derived from the Church of England, retains and approves the doctrine and principles of the Church of England embodied in the Book of Common Prayer together with the Form and Manner of Making Ordaining and Consecrating of Bishops, Priests and Deacons and in the Articles of Religion sometimes called the Thirty-Nine Articles.

Reading the doctrine and formularies of the church in conjunction with the theological import of the New Testament, together with the received tradition as mediated through the Church of England, the Anglican ecclesiology that emerges has these characteristics.

¹⁷ *A Church Without Walls*, p. 65.

¹⁸ *A Church Without Walls*, pp. 198-220.

(i) Community (*koinonia*)

Both Article XIX (*Of the Church*) and the Ordinal (*The Making of Priests*) speak of the Church as being 'a congregation' of the faithful, but there is nothing, of course, to determine whether that congregation may be contained within a predefined geographical area, a school, a hospital or nursing home, the armed forces, a monastic order, a fresh expression of church meeting in a local pub, or any other place where people form Christian community. The church is to be found, in the New Testament, where the people of God come together in corporate expression of their fellowship (or communion) in Christ. The New Testament descriptor that best expresses this is that of *koinonia*, which we might translate by the English equivalent 'community.' The basis of Anglican ecclesiology is, thereby, the same as that of the New Testament. It is found in, and experienced in, community. Well might the poet, and Anglican convert, T.S. Eliot, have written, in *The Rock*, 1936:

What life have you, if you have not life together?
There is no life that is not in community.
And no community not lived in praise of God.

(ii) Authorised leadership

This community is not any community of Christian people but one in which there is a duly 'set apart' (ordained) and authorised (licensed) leadership. The bishop's charge to the newly ordained priest in the Ordinal is:

Take thou Authority to preach the Word of God, and to minister the holy Sacraments in the Congregation, where thou shalt be lawfully appointed thereunto.

Anglican community is, thereby, further defined by the presence of a 'lawfully appointed' (licensed) Minister (of one of the three orders of ordained ministry, or an authorised lay person), having the 'cure of souls,' and exercising a leadership in that community which is at the same time accountable to, and carried out in partnership with, the responsible bishop, who alone makes the 'lawful' appointment.

(iii) Liturgy

Anglican community requires an authorised and lawfully appointed leadership for it is a community in which 'the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments duly administered' (Article XIX). The ministry of Word and Sacrament is, furthermore, not conducted according to any rite and pattern, but a prescribed form, that of the Book of Common Prayer, or another lawfully authorised form, and none other (so the Constitution, s 4). This preserves, insofar as it is possible to do so, the now greatly fragmented concept of 'Common Prayer' together with the Anglican doctrinal touchstone *lex orandi est lex*

credendi (literally: ‘the law of what is to be prayed is the law of what is to be believed’).¹⁹

The essential elements of an Anglican ecclesiology now become clear. It is a Christian community, an expression of the universal Church of Jesus Christ, particularised and given its Anglican identity by the presence of a leadership authorised by, and exercised in partnership with, the responsible bishop, in which there is exercised a ministry of Word and Sacrament that is conducted according to a lawfully authorised form of liturgy, whether the Book of Common Prayer or other duly authorised form, and none other.

4. Summary

As outlined above, the Anglican Church of Australia has always arranged itself geographically, into diocese and parish, and inherited from the Church of England the instruments of parochial governance, ministry, and incarnational mission. The traditional model of the parish is the most ubiquitous and instantly recognisable expression of Anglican ecclesiology. But it is not the only one. Anglican ecclesiology can, has in the past, and does now, bear many other ways of forming and nurturing Christian community, be they monastic congregations, fresh expressions, or educational institutions, etc. The historicity of the parochial system, its long and deep roots in the tradition inherited by the Anglican Church of Australia through the Church of England, together with the manner in which the present-day church is constituted in such a way that this structure is assumed (not least by the very recent *Parish Governance Act 2013*), warrant the parish, understood as a geographical unit, being considered the foundational unit of Anglican ecclesiological organisation, upon which other, new or ‘fresh’ expressions of Anglican ecclesiology arise and are built.

In summary, it can be said that the essential elements of Anglican ecclesiology are:

A community:

Which may be conceived and comprised of

- (i) all those living in a geographical area who do not refuse Anglican ministry (the parish model), or
- (ii) the sum total of those who gather in an institution or organisation (the chaplaincy model), or
- (iii) the congregation which gathers and meets in a certain place (the fresh expressions or gathered model).

This is not, however, any community, but one in which:

- (i) there is present a leader duly authorised by the responsible bishop, and
- (ii) the pure Word of God is preached and the Sacraments duly administered, and
- (iii) the liturgy of the church being at that time authorised is used, and none other.

¹⁹ Andrew Burnham, *Heaven and Earth in Little Space: The Re-Enchantment of Liturgy* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2010), p. 2.

It is to be recognised that this is always a temporal and limited understanding. God may, at any time, do something completely new and different. So Hans Küng begins his magisterial study of ecclesiology with the recognition that the essence and existence of the church always finds expression in malleable historical forms. Rather than considering a metaphorical or ideal conception of the church, Küng instead commences his ecclesiological investigation with 'the real Church as it exists in our world, and in human history.'²⁰ This is where we begin, but not where we end – 'your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven.'

²⁰ *The Church* (London: Burns & Oates, 1968), p. 5.