



PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS 2024

THE RIGHT REVEREND DR MARK SHORT

Living Hope in an Uncertain World

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Living Hope in an Uncertain World

I acknowledge the triune God, the Creator of heaven and earth and His ownership of all things. (Psalm 24:1) I recognise that He gave stewardship of these lands upon which we meet to the First Nations Peoples of this country (Acts 17:26). In His sovereignty, He has allowed other people groups to migrate to these shores. We acknowledge the cultures of our First Nations Peoples and are thankful for the community that we share together now. We pay our respects to elders, both past and present, and those who are rising up to become leaders.¹

Most of you will be aware of the Hope25 initiative that involves each of the 23 Dioceses of the Anglican Church of Australia. Under the theme 'Hope in an Uncertain World' Anglicans across our continent will be engaging in an intentional season of sharing the good news of Jesus between Easter and Pentecost 2025.

Later in Synod we will be participating in a Conference session and considering a motion commending Hope25. For now, I want to consider the theme of hope, both as it relates to the Christian faith in general and to our call to engage a world of difference with the love and truth of Jesus in this particular season.

Hope and the time we're in

In his book *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* philosopher and theologian JKA Smith notes the temporal nature of Christianity:

"We need to remember that at the heart of Christianity is not a teaching or a message or even a doctrine but an event. God's self-revelation unfolds in time, and redemption is accomplished by what happens."²

Living faithfully and hopefully and lovingly then is a matter of orienting ourselves rightly to what God has done with and in time through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Considering our past, hope is anchored in the events of Jesus' life and ministry:

"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children."

Galatians 4:5-6

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead..."

1 Peter 1:3

Considering our present, hope is experienced through the witness of the Holy Spirit:

"And not only that, but we also boast in our afflictions, knowing that affliction produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and 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."

¹ Written by The Reverend Neville Naden, BCA Indigenous Ministry Officer.

² JKA Smith *How to Inhabit Time: Understanding the Past, Facing the Future, Living Faithfully Now* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2022), p13.

Romans 5:3-5

Considering our future, hope anticipates and waits for the renewal of all things when Christ returns:

“We know that the whole creation has been groaning together as it suffers together the pains of labour, and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope, for who hopes for what one already sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.”

Romans 8:22-25

Christian hope then is not a passing emotion or a personal disposition. It is a worldview, a way of locating our lives within the broad sweep of all that God has done, is doing and will do through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hope and the times we're in

What can we say of this season in which we are called to live out this hope? The tagline for Hope25 defines them as “uncertain” and this is true at many levels.

First there are *economic uncertainties*. The quarter century after World War Two saw a period of rapid and sustained economic growth characterised by low unemployment and the extension of home ownership and a range of consumer goods to a much wider range of the population. Even when disrupted by the oil crisis in the 1970's and high unemployment in the 1980's there was still an assumption that the economy would ensure that each generation would be 'better off' than its forebears.

That assumption has been sorely tested in recent years, not least through a rise in asset prices which has benefitted those already holding such assets and disadvantaged those seeking to acquire them. This is particularly evident in the housing market where young adults are much less likely than previous generations to own a home at the same age.³

Next there are *political uncertainties*. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War there was an expectation, most famously expressed in Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History*, that liberal democracy would progress unhindered across the globe. In reality the subsequent 30 years have seen the rise of militant Islam and a resurgence of authoritarian governments. Even within relatively stable democracies there has been a rise in political polarisation and a decline in trust in public institutions.

In a recent edition of *The Atlantic* magazine Anne Appelbaum writes “Fear, cynicism, nihilism and apathy, coupled with disdain for democracy: This is the formula that modern autocrats, with some variations, sell to their citizens and to foreigners” and documents how the formula is finding an audience in the US and elsewhere.⁴

Third we live in an era of *technological uncertainties*. The challenge of climate change raises acutely the issue of whether technology is our enemy or our saviour when it comes to securing a sustainable

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https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/Briefing_Book46p/HomeOwnership#:~:text=Ownership%20by%20age&text=Between%201971%20and%202016%2C%20home,cent%20to%2062.2%20per%20cent.

⁴ Anne Applebaum Democracy is Losing the Propaganda War, *The Atlantic*, June 2024, pp30-40.

future for our children and grandchildren. The rise in artificial intelligence raises similar questions – will it be an answer to the aforementioned productivity crisis, could it threaten the very future of humanity or might it simply result in a proliferation of more banal and distracting online material?

Finally, we live in an era of *spiritual uncertainties*. We experience this both through the shifting patterns of religious affiliation and involvement but also through debates about the appropriate role of faith in schools, hospitals and other public institutions. My experience appearing earlier this year before an ACT Legislative Assembly Enquiry into Voluntary Assisted Dying convinced me that while we may all agree there is an important issue here we currently lack the language and the forums to advance the conversation in fruitful directions.

So where might hope be found?

Living hope – in missional engagement

In my first Presidential Address I encouraged us to consider our common calling under the heading ‘Engaging our World with the Love and Truth of Jesus’ and then fleshed this out through five priority areas

- gracious and patient witness
- safe and sustainable ministry
- creative and informed advocacy
- gracious and just stewardship
- inspiring and empowered worship

There are however powerful factors that might distract or discourage us from such an outward focus. Surveys have found that in the broader Australian community the most valued aspects of church life are the provision of worship and care for the poor. Conversely, the least valued are when churches advocate on political and social issues or when they engage in evangelism that seeks to persuade others of the merits of the Christian faith. To be sure, worship and pastoral care are both powerful expressions of Christian faith which have the potential to encourage insiders and attract outsiders. However, to not speak up for the sake of the temporal and eternal well-being of those around us is to fail to heed Christ’s call to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

Moreover, when we do so graciously and patiently we may encounter a surprising degree of interest in the good news of Jesus. For example, recent data from the Australian Community Survey found that people in their 20’s and 30’s are actually more open to conversations about faith and spirituality than people in their 50’s and 60’s. However, they wish to do so from a stance of curiosity and conversation rather than debating fixed and settled positions.⁵

It’s in light of this that I strongly encourage every ministry unit and agency to engage in the Hope25 initiative. You will of course need to decide what form of participation will work best in your context but I suggest the best approaches will be characterised by a willingness to engage in conversation and dialogue, a commitment to ongoing relationship and an expectation that God will be at work as we share the hope we have in Christ in an attitude of gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15).

⁵ I am drawing here on the findings from the Australian Community Survey, as outlined by Dr Ruth Powell in a public lecture *The Spiritual Profile of Australians: trends over time* delivered at the Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture July 16 2024.

At our recent Hope25 training event at St Saviour's Cathedral Canberra-raised and UK-based evangelist Glen Scrivener suggested four 'seeds' or conversation starters that often bear fruit:

- "What I love about Jesus is ..."
- "What god do you believe in/not believe in?"
- "What I love about my church is ..."
- "I couldn't have got through (name experience) without Jesus ..."

During this weekend, why not share with those around you how you would complete one or more of these statements?

Living hope – in congregational establishment and renewal

Genuine hope is magnetic. It grows a sense of common purpose, it draws people together and builds community. That is certainly the case with the hope we have in Christ. The church is called to be a people where our hope in Christ is expressed through word and sacrament and embodied in practices of mutual service and generosity.

By God's grace over the past few years we have seen the establishment of several new congregations or fresh expressions of faith in our Diocese. Some, as in the case of the contemporary service at Bungendore or the Taylor Church Plant in Gungahlin have taken place under the umbrella of existing Parishes. In other instances, as with The Village Church at Jindabyne or the Parliamentary Triangle Ministry, there has been fruitful partnership with and oversight by the Exploratory Ministry Unit. This year Bishop Trevor Edwards has begun a learning community for leaders of these new congregations and I expect this will help us identify ways in which we can raise up new leaders.

Effective mission also requires the active involvement of our existing congregations. Over the past couple of years several Parishes have participated in a re-vitalisation project in co-operation with City to City Australia. The Diocesan Senior Leadership Group is about to begin to review this initiative so we can decide whether, and how and with whom we might pursue similar initiatives in the future.

So where are we as a Diocese in our congregational expressions of life? Recognising the fallibility of all statistics I've worked to track trends in church attendance across our Diocese. First, some good news. By 2023 church attendance across our Diocese was just 2.3 per cent below what it was in 2019. In other words, we have recovered almost all the loss of attendance we experienced during COVID. Second some challenging news. Between 2016 and 2019 (ie before the Pandemic) church attendance fell by almost 10 per cent, which means that across the whole of 2016-2023 we have experienced a loss in church attendance of 12 percent.

At the same time as I was preparing this material the Diocese of Sydney published a report which found a similar trend – ie stable or slightly increasing attendance up to 2017, followed by a sharp fall over the next two years, with post-pandemic attendance at around the same level as 2019.⁶

So what factor(s) common to both our Dioceses might explain this turning point around 2016/2017? I'd be interested in your theories but my best guess is that it relates to the release of the report of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* in December 2017.⁷ I would

⁶ The full Sydney report can be found at <https://bit.ly/AttendancePatterns>.

⁷ An additional factor may be the debate surrounding the Same Sex Marriage Postal Survey, which took place between September to November 2017.

encourage you to keep this in mind as later in this Synod we take note of an upcoming review of our Safe Ministry and Professional Standards policies and practices. What we do and are seen to do in these areas has significant missional implications. All of us in this room are legitimate stakeholders in these discussions. We also need to be mindful of those stakeholders who are not here, especially women and men, girls and boys who are not yet part of our congregational life and whose willingness to join will be impacted by our willingness to continue in rigorous (and sometimes costly) practice in this area.

So what can we say about the future of congregational life in our Diocese? Ultimately this lies in God's hands but let me suggest three areas worthy of our attention. First, there is the need to establish new congregations in areas of *population growth*. By 2060 the population of Canberra is forecast to grow from 450,000 to almost 800,000 with almost all of this growth happening north of Lake Burley Griffin. Indeed, almost all areas of our Diocese are forecast to experience population growth even if not to the same extent. Second, there is the need and the opportunity to engage with increasing *cultural diversity*. More and more this is an issue for rural and regional Parishes as well as those in cities. For example, when I recently attended the 150th celebration celebrations for Cootamundra Parish over half the congregation at the main service were people from Samoa employed at the town meatworks. Third, there is the need to connect with *people in transition* – whether from one location or from one life stage to another. It is often in these times of change that people are more open to considering the profound change offered through the gospel of Jesus.

Living hope – in relationship with First Nations people

My 2023 Presidential Address was delivered shortly before the Referendum on the proposed Voice to Parliament. In that address I sought to advance a Christian case for why such an innovation could represent both an honest reckoning with our shared history and a means of expressing those values and principles which animate our common life.

Since that time, a small cottage industry has developed seeking to explain the reason for the outcome of the referendum, which of course failed to achieve a majority overall or a majority in any State or Territory other than the ACT. It is not my intention to add to this plurality of punditry, but I was drawn to some remarks by 'Yes' campaigner Shireen Morris who suggests that the referendum failed to pass not because it came too early but because it happened too late.⁸

This resonates with conversations Monica and I have had over the past year with older Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians who recall both the hope that surrounded the 1967 Referendum and the sense that in the 1970's even more radical change such as a treaty was within reach – and this under the conservative Fraser government! Since that time however we have seen a steady decline in trust in institutions such as the media, churches, parliament and the judiciary.⁹ It can be hard to believe that the solution to long-standing problems lies in granting more access to institutions if those same institutions are believed to have been unworthy of such trust in the past.

If there is a way forward now then it is more likely in generating trust through 'bottom up' relational engagement rather than through 'top down' institutional reform. In this light I commend the motion

⁸ See her book *Broken Heart: A True History of the Voice Referendum* (Collingwood: Latrobe University Press, 2024).

⁹ The Edelman Trust Barometer is a source of up-to-date data on these trends. See [2024 Edelman Trust Barometer | Edelman](#).

sponsored by the Public Issues Commission which seeks to empower and equip local churches to engage in processes of deep listening and truth telling in their own context.

Living hope – through partnership between women and men

Culturally, we seem to be at something of a crossroads in the relationship between women and men. The successes of second and third wave feminism and the passage of legislation such as the *Equal Pay Act* and the *Sex Discrimination Act* might have been expected to usher in a period of equity and flourishing for women. However, while legislative reform may be necessary for such cultural change it is rarely, if ever, sufficient. The abuses revealed by the #MeToo movement and the continuing scourge of domestic violence, which impacts disproportionately on women and children, remind us that we are not there yet.

At the same time technological change and globalisation has impacted on many areas of traditionally male employment. At its best the subsequent conversation has begun to recognise the particular needs of boys and young men and whether they are well accommodated within the educational system. At its worst it has veered into renewed misogyny as seen in the rise of certain notorious online influencers.

What does this all say to the church? It has long been taken for granted that women are more likely than men to attend church and engage in other religious practices. However, there is some evidence that for younger generations this pattern is reversing. This may be because as those often responsible for the primary care of children women feel the impact of the child sexual abuse crisis referenced above particularly keenly.¹⁰

It's in light of this broader context that I wish to commend the work and report of the *Women in Leadership Working Group*. Our Diocese has a proud history of pioneering the legislative change that allows for the full participation of women and men at all levels of church leadership. However, the report is a sobering testament that this has not resulted in the cultural change necessary for all our sisters in Christ to flourish in their God given gifts.

It seems to me that as a generalisation the experiences of women and men are often different. How much of this is due to nature, nurture and to culture I leave to others. This does mean if we are to live up to the vision expressed in passages such as Acts 2 and Galatians 3:28 we need to consider how policies and practices that appear on the surface to be neutral and 'genderblind' actually disproportionately inhibit the opportunities of women, and other groups for that matter.¹¹ Such work will take time, but it has the potential to achieve genuine and lasting change.

¹⁰ See Kate Gleeson, Luke Ashton *Trust in Religion Among Women in Australia: A Quantitative Analysis*, 6 May 2024. Available at www.apo.org.au/node/326466

¹¹ The following example is one Monica has shared with me from her workplace experience. It had been the practice that when training opportunities which required some travel became available to invite people to express their interest immediately. Men would typically do so, in the expectation that any necessary childcaring and domestic arrangements would subsequently be worked out (by others?). Women would typically not volunteer unless or until domestic arrangements were sorted, and so often missed out on training. When *everyone* was allowed to volunteer within a two week window, the percentage of women accessing training increased noticeably.

Living hope – stewardship now for our common future

In due course we will consider our proposed *Climate Change Action Plan*. Beyond and before the technical details I offer the following theological reflections which I prepared for the plan.

As Christians we are called to climate action that is *responsible*. We acknowledge the impact that our behaviour, individually and collectively, has on the well-being of all creation. We take seriously the potential of humans to reinforce creational order or to introduce and spread dis-order. Rather than blaming others or waiting for them to take action we see ourselves as accountable for what we do with the knowledge, the opportunities and the influence God has given us.

Second, we are called to climate action that is *relational*. This means first of all our relationship to God. Climate action should not be a means of asserting our independence from God but of expressing our vocation before God. In some sense, it means being toward the rest of creation as God in Christ has been towards us.

Climate action is also a call to be in relationship with our neighbour. In the parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus reminds us that being a neighbour is not about where we choose to live but about whose needs we choose to recognise and address. Here our neighbours include our fellow Anglicans in the South Pacific, who are most at risk from rising sea levels, and future generations who will be deprived of safety and security if we fail to take action.

Finally, we are called to climate action that is *hopeful*. This is in contrast to the despair which assumes that all action is futile or the complacency that assumes that God will necessarily rescue us from the consequences of our inaction. It is grounded in the conviction that God works in and through people. It rejoices that the same Spirit who sustains the life of creation inspires believers to lives that bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, justice and generosity. It looks for the signs of new creation in the midst of this one and trusts that the Judge of all the earth will do what is right for it and all its inhabitants.

So where is hope to be found?

As I was putting the finishing touches to this address I had Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds' latest album *Wild God* playing in the background. Crafted in the crucible of Cave's suffering, most especially the death of two beloved sons, it is a work of profound depth and beauty. As with many artists Cave is often more allusive than explicit when it comes to his own beliefs although the title of the songs ('Conversion' 'Joy' 'Final Rescue Attempt' ') give some indication of the journey he's been on. The final number, 'As the Waters Cover the Sea' brings it home:

*She sits at the window
Her hands folded on her sleeping lap
As He steps from the tomb
In His rags and His wounds
Into the yellow light that streams
Through the window, He brings
Peace and good tidings to the land
Peace and good tidings to the land
And as the waters cover the sea
And as you wake and turn to me
Peace and good tidings He will bring*

Here is solid hope: not the mental pick-me-up of mere optimism but the assurance that the One who was wounded for us and for our salvation has stepped from the realm of death and decay into the bright shining light of resurrection life. Surely this is hope worth sharing!

May the living Lord Jesus Christ bring you and those you love peace and good tidings, now and always.

AMEN