

Anglican Diocese of
BENDIGO

BISHOP'S CHARGE

The Rt Rev'd Dr Matt Brain

Synod 2024



Acknowledgement of Country

The people belonging to the Djandak, meaning Country, that we are on, through bloodline and kinship, are known as the “Djaara” or people of the area.

Over time, many Djaara have come to identify as “Dja Dja Wurrung” the collective language group.

We recognise that the Dja Dja Wurrung People have a special relationship with their Djandak.

I would like to acknowledge and extend my appreciation for the Dja Dja Wurrung People, the Traditional Owners of the land that I am on today. May I encourage you to find out and know what country you are on.

We recognise that the arrival of Europeans in Victoria caused a rupture in the spiritual, environmental, political and economic order of Dja Dja Wurrung People.

Unrecorded numbers of Dja Dja Wurrung Ancestors had their lives taken in their fight for Djandak and Martinga Kulinga Murrup (Ancestral Spirits). Other Dja Dja Wurrung were forced from their traditional Country. Dja Dja Wurrung Ancestors struggled to maintain their way of life.

Today, we pay our respects to leaders and Elder’s past, present and emerging for they hold the memories, the traditions, the culture and the hopes of all Dja Dja Wurrung People.

In a constructive step towards reconciliation, the State of Victoria and the Dja Dja Wurrung People came together in good faith to reach a Recognition and Settlement Agreement in 2013 and to recognise the Traditional Owner rights under the Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010, as a means of settlement of the Dja Dja Wurrung native title claims. It is a means by which Dja Dja Wurrung culture and traditional practices and the unique relationship of Djandak is recognised, strengthened, protected and promoted, for the benefit of all Victorians, now and into the future.

We express our gratitude in the sharing of this land, our sorrow for the personal, spiritual and cultural costs of that sharing and our hope that we may walk forward together in harmony and in the spirit of healing.

Sorry Day (Sunday 26th May 2024) which precedes the National Reconciliation Week which for us concludes on Sunday 2 June with Reconciliation Sunday

A litany for reconciliation

Let us pray that we will be joined together in working for reconciliation, and the healing of our ancient land and its peoples.

Forgive us for remaining silent and bound by fear.

Give us the courage to speak and act with justice.

Forgive us for our arrogance in closing our eyes to all peoples and cultures.

Enable us to know your redeeming power.

Forgive us for disfiguring this land and despoiling its bounty.

Come Holy Spirit, renew the whole creation.

Forgive us for despising the cultures of others and taking away their self-respect.

Give us grace to bind one another's wounds.

Forgive us for not listening to the griefs of all who are oppressed in this land, especially its First Peoples.

Draw us together as one people.

Forgive us for our part in tearing apart families and profiting from the misery of others.

Strengthen us to live with respect and compassion for one another.

Lord God, bring us together as one, reconciled with you and reconciled with each other. You made us in your likeness, you gave us your Son, Jesus Christ. He has given us forgiveness from sin. Lord God, bring us together as one, different in culture, but given new life in Jesus Christ, together as your body, your Church, your people. Lord God, bring us together as one, reconciled, healed, forgiven, sharing you with others as you have called us to do. In Jesus Christ, let us be together as one. **Amen.**

Ruth the Moabite said to her embittered Mother-in-law:

“Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you.

Where you go I will go,

and where you stay I will stay.

Your people will be my people

and your God my God.

Where you die I will die,

and there I will be buried.

May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely,

if even death separates you and me.”

(Ruth 1:16b-17 NIV)

Ruth found herself with the need to sift competing demands. A widow in a world without a social safety net or means to find independent security. A daughter-in-law at the beck and call of an embittered older woman. An outsider taken away from her family and community of origin. A young woman without the capacity to bring a new family to life. Yet faced with immediate pressure.

Who will provide my home and food?

Who will allow me to flourish?

Who will gather my hopes, dreams, and expectations?

Who will bring me joy and carry me beyond myself?

Sifting competing demands is one of the great challenges of human life. The pressure can lead to frenetic but fruitless action or paralysis. When we add the expectations which so often float beneath the surface of each of our own experience, and which we are usually only marginally or fleetingly aware, the pressure to do or not do certain things grows. Choice becomes confusing or we chase after this or that thing without pausing to consider what is the best thing, or needful thing we must do together. If pressure and paralysis are symptoms of demanding human life then they are also the sources of guilt or

friction in our Christian life, ironically because we know the stakes are so high. What is more important than following the Lord?

Ruth was caught amid pressured circumstance and needed to sift priorities. To decide the difference between action and *timely* action – the right thing for *this* time. She had to choose between

What was *timely* and what was safe.

What was *timely* and what was familiar.

What was *timely* and what was new.

Last year spoke about the potential for fear to paralyse, and I refreshed the acronym WISE – we must **W**orship and honour God, **I**ntercede for our future and that of our community, be **S**aturated in God's word, and we focussed then on **E**ngaging with people, community and world around us. This year we progress to consider the potential for a demanding world to confuse, pressure and (again) paralyse as we seek to Engage.

When is a dump a tip...and when is it an RMC?

I will pause at this point and ask the question; when is a rubbish dump a tip, and when is it an RMC? RMC stands for Resource Management Centre of course!



This is my favourite roadside sign in all of Australia (and I have 'collected' a few, from the signpost to 'Bogan Gate' in central-west NSW, to 'Be a Lert...we need more Lerts' in mid-west WA). It is my favourite because of its location and irony. It stands on a main road leading out of central Canberra

into the southern suburbs. It points the way to the main tip, the rubbish dump. Where else but Canberra would good 'management' turn 'rubbish' into 'resource'?

Before we write this off as another 'pollies/bureaucrats don't get real life' jibe I suspect this illustrates part of our struggle with competing demands, especially as we do so as Christians working together in this part of God's church.

Clearly much of what we discard through our rubbish system is wasteful and can be reused or recycled in some way. It is indeed a resource which if managed well can be rescued from waste. However, not all of that which is sent there can ever be turned into a resource, no matter the skill of the management! We cannot simply include everything captured by what we throw away in a catch all term 'resource'.

When 'mission' means everything, it ends up meaning nothing.

In a similar way the activities of common Christian life are usually caught up in the language of mission. We are a people of mission.

We have missions

We do mission

We support mission

Our activities are even 'mission shaped'

For all the good that our acceptance of mission as a defining characteristic of the church, we run the risk that when mission means everything, it ends up meaning nothing. If mission becomes a term to baptise any activity we want to do we find ourselves without the tool we need to sift the many things we could do to find the things we must do. We fall into the demanding pit of life without a ladder out.

So, another question comes to mind, 'how do we avoid narrowing 'mission' too far without collapsing everything into it?'

In Australia, especially within the Anglican church, we tend to polarise most debates surrounding church life, ministry, and theology. As we approach mission the tendency has been to express mission as only practical action to express the Kingdom of God on earth as it is in heaven, or only the declaration of the evangelistic message of the Gospel. Either pole narrows mission further than we see described as being God's purpose in scripture. Yet, to simply see mission as a portmanteau (or convenient bag) to throw our preferences or compulsions into we place familiarity, expectation, or worse, our own preferences before a careful consideration of what God would have us be and do.

I dream of a diocese...

Every year I remind you of my dream for this diocese:

"I dream that there is a congregation of people worshipping God in every community"

I dream that throughout the diocese we will nurture support and share in the life of worship and witness to Christ which brings 'life and life to the full' (John 10:10).

This dream of mine seeks to sharpen and give focus to the diocesan vision which is to:

"Transform society through the gospel of Jesus Christ by building healthy mission-shaped communities"

You will remember that last year, at the first session of this Synod, our Registrar Sarah Crutch introduced us to the Diocesan Strategic Plan to help focus our hearts and minds until 2027. We intend to be Responsive Parishes with Engaged People and Adaptable Spaces. Shortly you will hear an update on the work to take this plan from a series of well-intentioned ideas into a practical guide for our work together. In it there are goals which naturally rely on different parts of our diocesan family to achieve. Yet as a whole it reflects

the discernment of God's desire for us now in this place and at this time reflected by the many who contributed to its formation.

The ministry of the brussels sprouts

I will pause again to tell you a foundational story from my own growth in faith and ministry. Like many young Christians, especially those who had grown up in clergy households, I had moved directly from being a youth group member to being the youth group leader. I had persevered at this for a couple of years and while not doing anything stupid or dishonouring to God I do not think I had done a particularly good job. It was a struggle and I suspect that the youth-groupers I tried to lead did not get all that they could have out of the experience.

In God's grace I did not fall out of Christian service but moved on to the easier peer-to-peer ministry of the university campus and home-group. I loved these opportunities, and it was through these that my call to vocational ministry became apparent. But here is where the problems started!

Since concluding as the youth group leader my local parish (which happened to be under my father's leadership) had scraped together some money to employ a youth worker, and two successive young people had fulfilled that role. However, the second left the post suddenly leaving the group without care.

In his understated way my father sat me down and said: 'Matt, Felicity (not her real name) has finished up.' I replied, 'hmm, yes, I know.' And paused. Dad waited too. Eventually he said, '... well Matt, you want to be a minister. You need to take it up!' The problem was I had sworn I would never do youth ministry again. I was no good at it. There were other, easier things to do, and I did not like the activities it entailed. But Dad was right. I did want to be a minister, the youth of the parish needed care, and I was available.

This is what I call the ministry of the brussels sprouts. Sometimes what we should eat does not immediately strike us as the most attractive thing to eat. Sometimes what we should do may not be the thing we would prefer to do.

The happy end of the story I told is that I quickly found that God had changed me in the few years out of leading the youth group enough for me to discover a love for the teens which I did not have before, and therefore a delight in the ministry I now had. Indeed, it became the place where I had the privilege of learning and growing in the ways that established much of what I bring into this ministry with you. If I had seen what was needful at the time and said 'no' I would have missed being part of God's activity in the parish and been less of a Christian and minister for it.

And, by the way, I do not mind eating brussels sprouts now, especially if they are roasted.

Timely leadership in a pressured age

It strikes me that Christian leadership is often attended by conversations, and choices, just like those my father had with me. I am sure that you have all arrived here at synod with a list of priorities for our diocese, parishes, and congregations; or if not priorities, anxieties and demands playing on your hearts and minds.

So, I return to the themes of timeliness and mission. Particularly, how do we sort through all of the good things we could do in the name of mission to choose the right way to act in God's work so that it is fit for this time.

In my view there are three attributes which we bring to the shared task of leadership within God's church, as we seek to involve ourselves and the church we must care for in the mission which matches God's own: Charisma, Position and Time.

Charisma is a large word which reaches into the personal disposition one brings. Well known leaders are often 'charismatic' or have an enchanting and attractive way of drawing others on. However, it also captures what we know as 'gifting' and relates to our capacity to apply skill or capability to the various demands of a situation.

Position relates to where a person is situated in the network of relationships which make up families, communities, and institutions. What responsibility have they been entrusted with? What decisions can they make, and how should they make them? How is their power to be exercised – where are they free to act and where are they constrained? Power and position are usually regarded together. Those with responsible positions are seen to hold power.

Time in leadership has a similarly broad meaning. There is the time needed to prepare, and the space which is needed to put a plan into place and implement it. There is also the time when it is important that the planning and implementation stops, and the work achieves its desired outcome; or not. Is the time we are given spent wisely, and fruitfully or does it simply pass us by.

Each of these attributes captures broad shades of meaning. Each of the three interact in complex ways. Our pressured age tends to push us towards those aspects of each attribute which prioritise personal dynamism, power, and preferences. The way that leadership is exerted within our wider community has certainly veered this way. This is not always bad, nor never needed. However, it does diminish other parts of the whole task of leading and does tend to make decision making a contest of wills.

Yet our role, and I speak to you as those who share the task of leadership within this part of God's church, must take the full breadth of what charisma, position and time demand into account and apply it to what is most important for *this* time. If we are to lead well when there is so much to do, and so many good things we could do what lens will help us to lead in a timely way. Choose from among the things that could happen the things which must happen.

If Ruth gives us a model of what it is like to choose well in the middle of confusing and pressurised decisions, then we turn to Jesus to understand how he remained focussed on the choices which had to be made, even if he could have made other ones.

The last words John records as escaping Jesus' lips as he died on the cross are well known. 'It is finished.' In the original language of the New Testament it is a single word - τετελεσται (tetelestai) which captures a whole depth of

meaning. The 'te' tells us Jesus is doing something which is complete and stands complete for ever (the perfect tense). The 'stai' indicates the action is happening to Jesus rather than Jesus doing the act. And the 'teleo'; to accomplish something. In this context Jesus is saying, 'My death accomplishes everything which I needed to do; now and every step from now.'

As we reflect then on the decisions which Jesus made to that point, some of which seemed very strange to those following him, we can hear him expressing the completion of his work. Each of those decisions were building to a crescendo which now reached its climax. However, unlike the climax of an orchestra which fades as the notes resonate through the hall, these notes continue to ring throughout eternity to come. The 'teleo' of Jesus work was not simply the finish line, but the completion and fulfilment.

As glass fulfils its purpose or is complete in itself when it is filled with cool water on a hot day, so Jesus' work (and amazingly his person) was being completed and fulfilled as he breathed his last. The decisions he made and the actions he took were found to be timely and whole in that moment. They were the right things to do and decide to do even if they seemed odd, and even if there were other good things which could have happened.

So, I return to my question: How do we sort through all of the good things we could do in the name of mission to choose the right way to act in God's work so that it is fit for this time?

As we work through the decisions we must make and the things we choose to do our gifts (charisma), positions of responsibility and the time we are given to act all come into play, but it is in discerning that balance between the timeliness of the action and how it contributes to the wholeness of God's plan for our world which is the necessary key to unlocking the next door, or lighting the next step. To ask:

Where will we find completion?

How is fulfilment expressed?

Who is whole, who is not, and how is wholeness ministered?

Speak to those things which mark out for us the field within God calls us to work.

To then pose, ‘... How does this action fit our journey toward the fullness which Jesus brings?’ sharpens the possible actions to the timely.

And so, I turn to three opportunities and challenges, each of which you will hear more about this Synod: Hope 25, the Challenge of Recognition of Australia’s First Peoples, and releasing empowered congregations prepared to serve.

Earlier this year the Diocese of Bendigo hosted the annual week-long Bishops’ Meeting for the Anglican Church of Australia. Among numerous good outcomes and happy experiences, the unanimous decision to embrace an intentional season of sharing hope in Jesus from Easter to Pentecost 2025 across the nation was made. We live in communities labouring under clouds of disappointment and hopelessness. To have the opportunity to be part of a national invitation seems to be a gift of God.

The Yoorook Justice Commission has been sitting since it was established by Letters Patent in 2021 and expects to deliver its final report next year. This year it has rightfully been examining the way in which land was taken without consideration from the first people of the country. Here in Victoria every single square centimetre was given to settlers of various sorts out of the custodianship of Aboriginal people. Your participation with me in activities to promote reconciliation between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and later settlers (most of us here) has been a source of gladness and thanksgiving to God. However, our work on ourselves has a long way to go. We, the churches which are now the Diocese of Bendigo, have inherited much property and have profited from dispossession. It falls to us to make right this injustice and engage with Aboriginal people here to redress this wrong. We must recognise the harm that was done in practical, financial, and relational ways. As I have said before, I cannot imagine being part of a church which knows what is right, has the means to do something about it, and fails to act.

Finally, I draw us back to my dream. That there is a congregation of people worshipping God in every community. It is empowered congregations who will be agents of God's transforming mission in our part of God's world as they are prepared to serve because they wholeheartedly place themselves within God's transforming power. So, we must press on ensuring our ministries are safe for all, investing time and attention in the training, checking and discipline which recognises that we should be holy just as our Father in heaven is holy (Matt 5:48). We must continue to prepare those who make up our congregations to never tire of the good works which God has prepared for us to do (Eph 2:10), investing in the teaching training and opportunities to serve which build each other up. We must persist in holding our assets lightly asking what is bread for the journey and what is lead in the saddlebag, for what we hold is not our own (1 Jn 3:16-17).

Ruth the Moabite bound herself to Mara, her embittered Mother-in-law. She recognised that in doing so she would be leaving what was familiar. However, her action was a timely participation in God's plan; for Mara who through Ruth's wisdom had her life become pleasant (Naomi means 'pleasant') once more, for herself as she found security, leadership, and fruitfulness out of instability, and for us as it was through Ruth that Jesus was eventually born.

Like Ruth what is our timely action. I commend these three:

- **One**, to join with our sisters and brothers across Australia to reach a world which has lost hope with the Hope of Christ.
- **Two**, to recognise that the land we use is not ours to cling to but seek to share with those who first held it.
- **Three**, empower safe, engaged, and fruitful people so that there is a congregation worshipping God in every community.