



Anglican Church of Australia

Primate: The Most Reverend Geoffrey Smith

Monday 26 July 2021

Dear Episcopal Colleagues,

If you've started preparation for next Sunday, you'll have noticed that the Epistle reading is from Ephesians 4.1-16, a significant passage on the unity of the church. John Stott in his commentary on Ephesians describes this as one of the two classic passages on Christian unity with the other being John 17. Ephesians 4 starts with these words: *I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

I note especially the call to make 'every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit'. *Every effort* is a very strong statement and one which needs to be taken very seriously by us as disciples of Jesus and leaders in his church.

As I reflected on the Ephesians passage, and last Monday's statement by Gafcon Australia announcing the formation of a company, led by a small board including a retired bishop, which will be the basis of a so-called Diocese, I have to say, I was struck by what I see as a contradiction between the Ephesians passage and Gafcon's statement.

Following the publication of the Appellate Tribunal's opinion last year I called for restraint to enable clear air for discussion at the next meeting of the General Synod which will be our first opportunity to discuss the change to the Marriage Act and the opinion of the Appellate Tribunal. I am grateful that very significant restraint has been shown by people who might want to see movement toward the blessing of same sex couples, and also by those who are still seeking clarity in their position. In my view, unfortunately, the Gafcon board has not shown similar restraint as we wait for that opportunity for discussion and decision making, with Monday's announcement ramping up the tensions among us.

We need to be clear that the opinion of the Appellate Tribunal has not changed the doctrine of the Anglican Church of Australia. The Appellate Tribunal can't change the doctrine of anything. All the Appellate Tribunal can do in these matters is respond to questions concerning the Constitution of the Anglican Church of Australia and the Canons adopted by the General Synod. There is no legitimate claim that the Appellate Tribunal has changed in any way the doctrine of our church.

I am unaware of any bishops of our church who have been found to have departed from the doctrine of the church by any properly constituted tribunal or process. There is no fair or reasonable basis for any member of the Anglican Church of Australia to believe that a bishop of this church has departed from the doctrine of our church.

It is important to highlight that despite the forecasts, there has not been a flood of same sex blessings following the Appellate Tribunal opinion. Not a flood, not a trickle. Not a drip.

In other words, faithful, orthodox Anglicans can continue with confidence as members of the Anglican Church of Australia. To suggest or insinuate otherwise is to not speak the truth.

In many ways it doesn't matter what Gafcon does since it has no structural connection to the ACA. We could say, 'Gafcon can do what it wants to do, and we will get on with our work'. The difficulty I have with this apparently neat solution is that some leaders in the ACA are leaders in Gafcon and its board.

My expectation is that people who say they are committed to the Anglican church, and who have made oaths and promises upholding its constitution and canons and therefore its governance processes, would be committed to keeping it strong, united and effective. I have to say this is difficult to see in Gafcon's statement and proposed actions. It feels like the life of our church is being undermined from within. Rather than making 'every effort' to stay together, a way is being prepared for a quick exit. We haven't even had the conversation yet, and the Gafcon boat out of the Anglican Church of Australia is being readied for departure.

It might also be easy to say- 'if you don't like it leave'. But that's not the way I believe will glorify God, preserve our unity and above all enhance our missional effectiveness. This approach would be easy but would be to take the world's way of dealing with matters of difference.

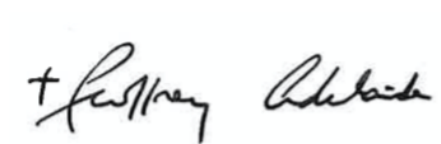
As Christians and especially as leaders in Christ's church we are called to reflect God's enormous grace by which we are saved. We are called to *'lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'*. This is hard work and requires love. Stott again, says, 'love is the final quality, which embraces the preceding four, and is the crown and sum of all virtues'. Rather than say, 'if you don't like it leave', I say, 'please, let's take the less easy path and by God's grace work on staying together', though I realise fully this will take *humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love*.

I understand that the presence at national bishops' meetings of some bishops who are supportive of Gafcon's actions might lead others to, from a conscience perspective, stay away from the meetings. My strong encouragement is for everyone to attend. All bishops in office will be invited. As bishops in the church of God we have a corporate responsibility to lead the church which, in my view, is greater than the sensitivity of individual conscience.

One of the very powerful accounts in the Scriptures is the journey of the people of Israel from captivity in Egypt to the promised land. Throughout the journey the people were asked to trust in God who constantly demonstrated trustworthiness. But from time to time the people became afraid and let that fear rather than trust in God drive their actions. Each time that happened the outcome was not good or godly. My prayer is that as bishops in the church of God we won't give in to fear for the future of the church, or fear for outcomes of any future General Synod, but will trust in God whose church we serve and whose mission we share, always making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Please be assured of my prayers for you. Please keep praying for me.

Peace in Christ

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Geoffrey Smith', enclosed in a thin black rectangular border.

The Most Reverend Geoffrey Smith
Archbishop of Adelaide and Primate of the Anglican Church of Australia