



Facing the past Shaping a healthy future



29 September 2016

BACKGROUND STATEMENT FROM THE ANGLICAN DIOCESE OF NEWCASTLE

Over recent weeks the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle has been alerted to some social media commentary which misrepresents Bishop Greg Thompson, the Bishop of Newcastle, and the governance of the Diocese. The Diocese has published the following background statement.

The current Royal Commission case study is the second directly involving the Diocese. The material presented to the Commission has shocked members of the Diocese and the community.

As we heard the ongoing testimony before the Commission in August, many in the Diocese were deeply troubled by the statements made about Bishop Thompson in a letter that was sent to the Archbishop of Sydney and to the Royal Commission by a small number of parishioners mainly associated with the Cathedral. These reflections showed very little insight into the impact of sexual abuse and reflected a disposition towards the Bishop that was out of keeping with the duties of those holding leadership roles in the Diocese. A number of signatories to the letters challenged Bishop Farran when he disciplined three people previously associated with the Cathedral for gross misconduct including child abuse. Many of the same correspondents also actively campaigned against the sale of the historic residence Bishops court.

The Diocese has taken action within its legal framework to ensure that the Cathedral, as the leading church in the Diocese, and its lay leadership reflect a healthy diocesan culture and display Christian hospitality and care especially to those affected by abuse. There is strong support in the Diocese and the community for these actions.

When the hearings of the Commission resume in November, Bishop Thompson will be a witness. His testimony will indicate that throughout his adult life he has sought, like other survivors, to integrate the traumatic experience of abuse. He never envisaged that it would be necessary to speak so openly of his personal experience but has done so in response to the Royal Commission and to promote the healing of the Diocese. The need to do this became plain to Bishop Thompson in his first few months as Bishop of Newcastle in 2014.

There is considerable work being done across the Diocese, with the help of external consultants, to help parishes understand and address the cultural issues that allowed abuse to flourish and ensure the most appropriate response by the Diocese to survivors and the wider community.

Bishop Thompson listened to his new Diocese in 2014 and saw that the best way to build on the evident momentum for mission was to re-introduce a decentralised support structure for clergy with the appointment of six regional archdeacons in addition to the pastoral support structure of regional area deans. These clergy provide key support as parishes embrace change and engage in new ministries. The decentralised approach is central to enabling healthy ministries suited to their context to flourish. Bishop Thompson appointed leaders from differing theological traditions including Fr Rod Bower who stands in the progressive Anglican tradition, which has long been accepted in the Diocese of Newcastle. Fr Bower makes a distinct contribution in social justice and interfaith ministries. Unfortunately there is ongoing social media commentary that criticises the governance of the Diocese including the appointment of Fr Rod Bower as the Archdeacon for the Central Coast.

Bishop Thompson and Bishop Stuart (the Assistant Bishop) maintain significant pastoral and ministry loads in addition to the work of responding to the Royal Commission. Their ministry includes regularly listening and responding to people's joys and concerns about diocesan life. Bishop Thompson celebrates that he has a strong team working to support the parish, school and agency ministries of the Diocese.

The 2015 Synod gave strong support to the process of facing the past and shaping a healthy future together with a financial plan aimed at ensuring that those who seek redress from the Diocese, because of abuse, receive a prompt, fair and pastoral response. The Synod recognised the complex issues that the Diocese faces and encouraged the Bishop in his ministry. The members of Synod recognised that it was not simply ensuring that the Royal Commission had the material it required that placed a burden on the Diocesan staff. The Bishop and others have continued to engage with police, survivors and their close supporters, clergy and parishes most affected by predatory behaviour by people many of whom were well known to each other. The majority of clergy and lay people have understood and affirmed that the ministries of its bishops and others would be different in this season of healing.

The Diocese is committed to proper accountability through the Synod and to external bodies such as the Royal Commission. We ensure transparent and prompt in our engagement with the local media. We maintain an extensive website which is regularly updated with news across the Diocese.

The Diocese is confident that when the Synod meets in December it will continue to affirm the need for people to be able to participate in church life with safety and the need to respond promptly and pastorally to those who have experienced harm in the Church in the past. We are confident that the Synod will continue to affirm the need for cultural change through actively facing the past and taking creative steps to shape a healthy future.

[Ends]

MEDIA ADVISORY

1. The Diocese is not making any other comment at this time. The Bishop is not available for interview.
2. We would ask that in reporting on this matter you remind people that they can contact Lifeline on 13 11 14, the NSW Police on 1800 333 000, and the Diocesan Director of Professional Standards on 1800 774 945.

MEDIA CONTACT

Louise Mackay

Communications Manager

P: 4926 3733

E: louisemackay@newcastleanglican.org.au