

Let's rediscover corporate worship and prayer

(A report from a member of the Synod.)

Summary

In Sydney we minister to a society where many thousands have deep spiritual yearnings that remain unfulfilled. Yet few are listening to our good news of God's redeeming love through Our Lord Jesus Christ. Why? While there must be many reasons, there's plenty of evidence that points to the content and quality of what we do in church on Sundays. In our typical gatherings/meetings/services the focus is now on an expository sermon, all else is peripheral. But modern seekers after faith want an experience of God rather than a set of doctrines to believe in. We want these seekers to be attracted to our churches and come back week-by-week to actually hear and experience our sound biblical preaching. So let's honour God and nourish souls by putting more emphasis on corporate prayer and worship – something that Anglicans have done so well in the past.

1. It's an unfortunate fact that in Sydney no more than about 1% of the population still regularly attends Anglican churches. And between the 2011 and 2016 censuses, the percentage of people in Sydney declaring themselves to be Anglican dropped from 16.1 to 12.0 – below the national average of 13.3%. With numbers like these, how can we expect to be taken seriously in the public square? How can we even continue to be taken seriously among Anglican evangelicals on the world scene?
2. We pride ourselves on our evangelical credentials, on our biblical theology and the power of our preaching, but is anyone listening? The data speak for themselves (Table 1). The five years from 2011 to 2016 show a decline in church attendance to scarcely more than 1% of the population. Even the Church of England still does better than this.¹ (see Table 2)
3. Yet as a diocese we've made every effort to bring the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ to the people of Sydney. We've seen the Diocesan Mission of 2002 which had the laudable aim of getting 10% of the population into "Bible-based churches" within the next decade. Then Connect09 – and now we're in the midst of Mission 2020.
4. Moreover, we serve Christ in a city that appears to be more "religious" than any other capital city in Australia.² And we serve Christ in a nation where social researcher Hugh MacKay tells us that 60% of the population have deep spiritual yearnings that remain unsatisfied.³ This is in stark contrast to the Church of England which ministers to a much more godless society but achieves a regular 2% attendance at its churches (see Table 2).

Table 1. Aggregate attendance at Sydney Anglican churches between 2011 and 2016

Year	Aggregate church attendance ^a	Population of Greater Sydney (millions) ^b	Aggregate church attendance as a percentage of population
2011	53,162	4.39	1.21
2012	52,947	4.68	1.13
2013	53,297	4.76	1.12
2014	54,468	4.84	1.13
2015	55,025	4.92	1.12
2016	51,553 ^c	5.03	<1.13 ^d

^a From the Archbishop's reply to a question asked by Mr Ken West at the 2017 session of Synod (11 October).

^b Australian Bureau of Statistics. (But note that the ABS's definition of Greater Sydney does not coincide exactly with the boundaries of the Anglican Diocese of Sydney.)

^c Provisional figure – some parishes had not provided their attendance statistics. At the time of writing (May 2018) the Diocesan Secretariat was unable to supply final data.

^d Upper limit assuming that no more than 10% of parishes had failed to provide attendance statistics.

¹ See, for example, Church of England weekly attendance falls below 1m for the first time, *The Guardian*, Wednesday 13 January 2016.

² Census 2016: Sydney's bible belt is losing faith, *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 6 2017, <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/census-2016-sydneys-bible-belt-is-losing-the-faith-20171004-gyuecs.html>.

³ Hugh Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, Macmillan, 2016.

Table 2. Comparison of Anglican affiliation and regular church attendance in Sydney and England

	Population identifying as "no religion" (%)	Population identifying as "Anglican" (%)	Population regularly attending Anglican churches (%)
Anglican Diocese of Sydney	25 ^a	15 ^a	1.0
Church of England	53 ^b	15 ^b	2.0 ^c

^a Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016 census.

^b British Social Attitudes Survey, 2016.

^c Church of England, Statistics for Mission, 2016.

5. We are clearly failing in our key mission. Why?

6. No doubt there are many reasons, but there's plenty of evidence that points to one in particular – the content and quality of what we do in church on Sundays. The prevailing Sydney view is that church on Sunday is a "gathering" rather than a time for worship. We are there primarily to hear an expository sermon and all else is peripheral.⁴ And with a few notable exceptions this has now become the standard practice throughout the diocese – from Brooklyn to Lithgow to Ulladulla.

7. But our gatherings/meetings/services are our "shop window" – they're what a newcomer to one of our churches immediately experiences. And we certainly have a distinctive style, radically different from other Anglican churches in Australia and the wider Anglican Communion. For example, the Wikipedia entry on the Sydney Anglican Diocese says about us (among other things):

The term "meeting" is sometimes used interchangeably with "service". Many meetings at Evangelical churches in the diocese do not use a prayer book or a liturgical form of service. A screen and projector may be used in place of books. In many parishes fermented communion wine has been replaced with grape juice.⁵

8. Anecdotally I know that even deeply committed Anglicans are unhappy with these changes. A friend told me how he and his wife were reluctantly leaving the church where they'd worshiped and served the Lord faithfully for more than twenty years.

We don't have services any more, only meetings – and I go to enough of them during the week. What's more, meetings with no agenda. No prayer book; only one Bible reading and a few perfunctory prayers – Holy Communion only once in a blue moon.

9. Another friend told me recently (in a despairing tone of voice) that at her church the new rector had taken out the communion table, and when they had Communion something like a card table appeared.

10. And data presented to the 2017 session of Synod reveal an ongoing malaise in our churches. Speaking on behalf of the Strategic Research Group, Bishop Peter Lin compared data from National Church Life Surveys in 2011 and 2016. Metrics included desire to share the gospel and invite newcomers to church, prayerfulness and utilisation of gifts. Against most criteria, the overall numbers were largely static or featured slight decreases since 2011. Some of these decreases included reported time in prayer and Bible reading, inviting friends to church and retention of children of church members.⁶

11. Unfortunately, none of this is real news – but we seem to be in denial.

12. In 2011 (reporting in the *Briefing* on statistical research by Tim Sims), Tony Payne wrote⁷

... we must face up to our failure to find new adult converts/attenders. ... As a whole Sydney Anglicans are not reaching the non-Christian adult population of our city.

Our 'conversion rate' is very low—that is, the rate at which newcomers or visitors find compelling reasons to stay at our churches and become regular attenders.

⁴ See, for example the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission report on 'A theology of Christian Assembly' (2008). This report makes no reference to worship at all, and makes only passing reference to prayer. It seems that public worship and prayer are no longer the church's concern!

⁵ For similar comments, see Marcia Cameron, *Phenomenal Sydney*, pp 199-200.

⁶ Ever optimistic, Bishop Peter Lin also pointed to an *increase* of 3 per cent in church membership by people from non-English speaking countries. But even this increase is illusionary in terms of population growth. The Australian Bureau of Statistics reported much the same increase in the overall percentage of people in Greater Sydney speaking a language other than English at home – from 32.4% to 35.8%.

⁷ Tony Payne, *Why aren't we growing*, *Briefing*, August 2011, <http://matthiasmedia.com/briefing/2011/08/why-arent-we-growing/>

13. The hard reality is that we're driving people away from our churches in droves. For every 100 people in our churches we gain 5.8 each year from people switching into our churches from other cities or denominations. But we *lose* more through people transferring out or drifting away from church (a total of 6.0 people on average).⁸ Though our typical Sydney "meetings" clearly have appeal for some people, we're ignoring the spiritual needs of many more.⁹ And we're compounding the problem with our one-size-fits-all approach.

14. When we call what we in the Sydney Diocese do on Sundays a "gathering" or a "meeting" we reflect a shift in our whole approach to public worship. Obviously it's not the intention to drive people out of our churches. But if our currently typical style of services/meetings is designed to attract 21st century Sydneysiders into our churches, as scientist I'd have to say that the experimental data don't support the theory – meaning that it's time to have a serious rethink.¹⁰ And as a Christian I'd have to question whether God might be somewhat displeased with us – suggesting that it's time to repent.

15. It's instructive to look at the two styles of worship that *are* seeing significant growth – Pentecostalism¹¹ (such as Hillsong) and formal cathedral worship^{12,13}. Both forms of worship contrast with the prevailing Sydney pattern by being more experiential than cerebral.

16. Hugh Mackay's research found that one of the most effective ways of discouraging people from attending church is to insist that they meet certain rigid requirements for 'becoming a Christian'.¹⁴ Pentecostalism resonates with this trend for modern seekers after faith to want an experience of God rather than a set of doctrines to believe in.¹⁵ And cathedrals seem to especially appeal to those who are sceptical about institutional religion but have a longing for the spiritual.¹⁶ As English historian (and Anglican minister) Jane Shaw puts it

First of all, the beauty of a cathedral draws people in; the strong emphasis on worship and music reiterates that sense of the aesthetic, reflecting the glory of God, prompting people to reach beyond themselves to the transcendent. This is one reason the arts are so important in cathedrals. Secondly, cathedrals allow anonymity. ... People can "test" out religion without someone grabbing them and putting them on the coffee rota the minute they enter the door. They are places for resting in the beauty, for exploring the transcendent at one's own pace.¹⁷

17. This may seem a long way from our Sydney emphasis on the Word. But we do have to persuade spiritual seekers to actually come into our churches – and to come back, Sunday after Sunday – if they are going to truly hear the Word and respond to Christ's redeeming love. And even committed churchgoers need to be spiritually nurtured and fed as part of a worshipping community.¹⁸

18. God has set us the task of ministering to a society where there is still a significant residue of people who hanker after the consolations of religion, the confidence enjoyed by believers and the peace of mind they associate with women and men of faith.¹⁹ A society where, according to Hugh Mackay,

... our response to the age of anxiety is likely to see a growing number of people being prepared to take another look at Christianity, or 'spirituality' more broadly, in an attempt to find some deeper, richer, more nuanced approach to life than social-media chatter or the slogans of a glib fundamentalism can provide.²⁰

⁸ Tony Payne, Why aren't we growing, *Briefing*, August 2011.

⁹ It's also an unfortunate fact that not one of the people whom I have painstakingly invited to church has ever wanted to come back.

¹⁰ The hard but just rule is that if the ideas don't work, you must throw them away: Carl Sagan.

¹¹ Christianity on wane in Australia but Pentecostal church bucks trend, *The Guardian*, 27 June, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jun/27/christianity-on-the-wane-in-australia-but-pentecostal-church-bucks-trend>.

¹² See, for example, Deans discuss cathedral ministry among children, advocate adoption of national child safe standards, St Paul's Cathedral Melbourne, August 17, 2017, <https://cathedral.org.au/2017/08/07/deans-discuss-cathedral-ministry-among-children-advocate-adoption-of-national-child-safe-standards/>

¹³ Bingham, J., Daily Telegraph (UK), 3 April 2012.

¹⁴ Hugh Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, page 75.

¹⁵ Hugh Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, page 162.

¹⁶ Jane Shaw, The potential of cathedrals, *Anglican Theological Review*, 95, 137 (2013).

¹⁷ Jane Shaw, The potential of cathedrals, *Anglican Theological Review*, 95, 137 (2013).

¹⁸ What people are looking for in their local church, <https://www.eterinitynews.com.au/australia/what-are-people-looking-for-in-their-local-church/>

¹⁹ Hugh Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, page 124.

²⁰ Hugh Mackay, *Beyond Belief*, page 48.

19. We should be reaching out to these people. Are we failing in our mission through a misplaced obsession with doctrinal purity?²¹ Worse, are we offending God through our neglect of corporate prayer and worship?

20. The Book of Common Prayer is perfectly clear about what we *should* be doing in church on Sundays. For example, in the preamble to the General Confession we read

And although we ought at all times humbly to acknowledge our sins before God; yet ought we most chiefly so to do, when we assemble and meet together

- *to render thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands,*
- *to set forth his most worthy praise*
- *to hear his most holy Word,*
- *and to ask those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul.*

21. Yes we must indeed “hear his most holy Word” – which necessarily includes a sermon²² – but in a context of prayer and worship. Doctrinal purity is a wonderful and godly discipline. But should it be at the expense of evangelism and the spiritual nurture of our members? After all, there’s nothing in the Scriptures to suggest that our mental capacities are any less fallen than the other aspects of our humanity. Neither do the Scriptures suggest that the solution to our fallen state is to restrict ourselves to a particular sort of propositional rationality.²³

22. The apostle Paul taught us not to conform to the pattern of this world,²⁴ but he also wrote about becoming all things to all men²⁵

To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

23. Our Anglican forebears who cherished the Prayer Book knew a thing or two about prayer and worship – and human needs in relating to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Are we really now so much wiser and better informed?

24. Bishop Paul Barnett has commented:

I am concerned about what I will call the postmodern direction of church life in which the unifying realities of Prayer Book, Articles and Ordinal are at a discount. ... Clergy sign up to certain commitments that place them within certain boundaries. I’m not advocating, of course, a return to 1662 or some other Seventeenth Century prayer book expression. That would be ridiculous in my opinion. But those liturgies have effectively been revised and modernised over the years. Not perfectly, but adequately. I think they do represent our boundaries that we ought to proudly own and seek to understand better. Seek to teach people their value. So that we have in terms of the Cranmer vision gatherings of Christians where the Bible is central in terms of reading Old and New Testaments, Psalms, where the creeds are fundamental, where the collects are used. Prudent use of the church calendar is employed to continue to shape the direction of Christian life. It’s a great shame I think where it may all depend on the preaching and on the “music”.

I think in effect what we have is just series of undifferentiated Protestant community churches – they might be Baptist or Church of Christ or whatever, so far as we can see. ... I think we ought to rethink this whole thing very carefully. Church leaders ought to ensure it happens.²⁶

²¹ See, for example, Paul Oslington, The new normal? Pentecostalism overtakes evangelicalism in Sydney, ABC Religion and Ethics, 26 August 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/08/26/4527401.htm>.

²² As Paul Oslington has commented, “Poor preaching often afflicts both Sydney Anglican and Pentecostal churches, but the Sydney Anglican attender sitting through a lengthy, scripturally dubious and pastorally barren sermon is more to be pitied than the Pentecostal attender for whom there are other possibilities in the meeting for engaging with God.”

²³ Paul Oslington, The new normal? Pentecostalism overtakes evangelicalism in Sydney, ABC Religion and Ethics, 26 August 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/08/26/4527401.htm>.

²⁴ Romans 12:2.

²⁵ 1 Corinthians 9:22.

²⁶ Bishop Paul Barnett quoted in Marcia Cameron, Phenomenal Sydney, p. 230.

25. He's right of course. We've cast aside our glorious Anglican heritage to become a series of undifferentiated Protestant community churches. Unfortunately the nondenominational community churches "do church" better than us – they're growing while we are shrinking.²⁷ Pentecostal church meetings are designed for the congregation to "do business with God." By contrast Sydney Anglican meetings are designed to transfer knowledge about God, which we are supposed to act upon later, perhaps in our daily quiet times. There seems little sense of immediacy or direct encounter with God in many of our Sydney Anglican church meetings. We engage our minds but not our emotions. In fact I sometimes find myself sitting in church wondering if Jesus actually bothers to attend our meetings.

26. I suggest it's time to repent and rediscover the inestimable value of corporate prayer and worship. Let's truly honour God by setting forth his most worthy praise, rendering thanks for the great benefits that we have received at his hands asking those things which are requisite and necessary, as well for the body as the soul.²⁸ And by honouring God we ourselves of course derive spiritual nourishment. Jesus said

*This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.*²⁹

27. And in honouring God we might make our churches more attractive to 21st century spiritual seekers. Churchgoing, like most forms of human behaviour, isn't something people usually do for one reason: it is an expression of different needs – spiritual, aesthetic emotional, social. We are all different, with different needs. So it's just as well that, as Article 34 reminds us, 'It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, and utterly like ...' As Bishop Paul Barnett said, "Church leaders ought to ensure it happens."

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²⁷ Paul Oslington, The new normal? Pentecostalism overtakes evangelicalism in Sydney, ABC Religion and Ethics, 26 August 2016, <http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2016/08/26/4527401.htm>.

²⁸ It might also be salutary to look at Article 34 which says, among other things, 'Whosoever through his private judgement, willingly and purposely, doth openly break the traditions and ceremonies of the Church, which be not repugnant to the Word of God, and be ordained and approved by common authority, ought to be rebuked ...'

²⁹ John 6:50.