

A Theology of Christian Assembly

(A report from the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission)

Introduction

1. In Resolution 35/07 the Synod asked the Doctrine Commission –

“... to prepare a report for the next Synod presenting a theology of Christian assembly which can help shape authentic, biblical and Anglican orders of service suitable for the contemporary church.”
2. The Synod request sprang from an awareness that there has been a change in what occurs in Christian assemblies in the Diocese of Sydney during the last generation. Not so long ago, nearly all Anglican gatherings in our Diocese conducted ‘Divine Service’ using forms in *The Book of Common Prayer* or *An Australian Prayer Book*, and this was seen as theologically uncontroversial. Today, the picture is very different. As the Archbishop suggested in his 2007 Presidential Address to the Synod, there are numerous possible reasons for the change—the need for our gatherings to build relationships, the desire to express a greater level of human reality and the trend to utilise modern technology (Presidential Address, 17 September 2007). Perhaps there has also been a theological shift, or at least a loss of theological clarity about what the Christian assembly is for.
3. This report aims to explore the essential character, purpose and responsibilities of Christians meeting together, with a view to helping shape forms or “orders of service” that are “authentic, biblical and Anglican”. Each of these adjectives is important. Our forms of assembly need to be *authentic* in the sense that they communicate effectively to people living in early twenty-first century Sydney, *biblical* in the sense that they are clearly shaped by the Bible’s teaching, and also *Anglican* in the sense that they express the very best aspects of the tradition in which our particular churches stand.
4. A “theology of Christian assembly” is clearly an important contribution to the Christian doctrine of the church, since whatever else the church does it *assembles*. However the report deliberately uses the term ‘assembly’ rather than ‘church’ in order to focus on the question at hand: How are we to understand the phenomenon of Christians assembling? Further questions that may be raised in a Christian doctrine of the *church* are beyond the scope of this report.
5. The report has three main parts.

The first part (*The gathering of God*) explores the theological foundation and reason for Christians meeting together: the essential character of a Christian assembly.

The second part (*What are the purposes of a Christian assembly?*) considers what Christians assemble *for*: the intention or purpose of such assembling.

The third part of the report (*What ought assembled Christians do?*) reflects on the activities that appropriately express the character and purpose of Christians meeting together.

The conclusion explores how this understanding of Christian assembly can help shape the conduct of contemporary Christian gatherings.

I. The gathering of God

6. People meeting together is hardly a distinctively Christian activity. Humans everywhere gather and assemble for many different reasons and purposes: friends enjoy one another’s company; a family gathers around the meal table; colleagues work together on a co-operative project; sportspeople and their supporters assemble for the game; those suffering similar afflictions meet for mutual support and encouragement; representatives of a community assemble to fight an enemy; national leaders meet to govern; the United Nations assembles; people gather at a bus stop.
7. The phenomenon of humans intentionally assembling is universal, and stems from our created nature as relational beings in the image of God. Our capacity for relationships is a reflection of God’s own inner relationality. For in the fullness of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ we know that God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit, united in love. When humans assemble and relate to one another, they are not only expressing something essential to their natures but also something that is inherent to God’s.
8. However, the phenomenon of human assembly is fulfilled in God’s ultimate purpose for his creation. His eternal plan, crafted before the foundation of the world, is to unite all things in Christ, to gather for himself a vast assembly of people for his very own, from every nation, tribe, people and tongue, to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:3-14; 3:1-12; Rev. 7:9-12). The fulfilment of human life, and the reason for our creation, is in the gathering of God in Christ.
9. To understand the character of Christian assemblies today, and why they are so different from any other human gathering, we must see how they fit into this history-wide plan of God.
10. From the very beginning, it was not God’s intention that humans should “be alone” (Gen. 2:18), but that we should live in fellowship with each other and with our Creator. However, following Adam’s sin, this intimate fellowship was broken. God’s judgement was not only to drive humanity out from his presence, but to scatter them over the face of the earth (Gen. 3:24; 11:9). Humanity now lived in hostility and enmity, towards each other and their Creator. Even the good gift of human relationship and assembly could now become an expression of sin and rebellion (Ps. 2:6; cf. Acts 2:23; 4:24-28).

11. With the promises to Abraham we see the beginnings of God's plan to redeem and gather sinful, scattered humanity. In fulfillment of these promises, God redeemed Israel from slavery in Egypt, and gathered them around himself to hear his word at Mt Sinai. Israel at Sinai was not just a collection of saved individuals but a "people" (Deut. 29:13), an "assembly" (Deut 10:4; Acts 7:38), and a "holy nation" (Exod. 19:3-6). As they travelled through the wilderness to the Promised Land, they were called the "congregation" (e.g. Num. 1:2; 14:27; Josh. 22:18). Once in the land, when they came together before the Lord (as required by the law), they were the "assembly of the congregation" (Exod. 35:1; Num. 1:18; Judg. 20:1). Later, God's people also assembled at the dedication of the Temple (1 Kings 8:1-5) and upon the return from exile (Neh. 8:1).

12. In the assemblies of God's people in the Old Testament, particular importance was given to the place that the Lord had chosen (eventually the Jerusalem temple), to persons who played an essential role in that place (the divinely appointed Levitical priesthood), to times and seasons (the prescribed days and festivals) and to prescribed acts (the sacrificial and other rituals). Given the uncleanness that came upon Israel so easily through the ordinary features of life lived in this fallen world, the rituals of cleansing were especially important. Special times, places and persons were important aspects of the Old Testament gatherings of the people of Israel. They were commanded to go to the place (Deut. 12:5) at particular times (e.g. Deut. 16:8), where the priest made offerings and sacrifices (Deut. 12:6).

13. Just as God blessed Israel by gathering them together around himself, so the judgement that fell upon them for their disobedience meant the undoing of this gathering. The people were scattered among the nations (see Deut. 4:27; 28:64; Ps. 44:11; Jer. 9:16; Nah. 3:18). The promise of the prophets was that the day would come when God would gather his scattered people again (see Deut. 30:3; Ps. 106:47; Isa. 11:2; 34:16; 40:11; 43:5; 49:5; 54:7; 56:8; Jer. 23:3; 29:14; 31:8,10; Ezek. 37:21; Hos. 1:11; Mic. 2:12; Zeph. 3:20; Zech. 10:8,10).

14. As with all other strands of the Old Testament, Jesus came to fulfil the gathering purpose of God (see Matt. 3:12; 12:30; 13:47; 18:20; 23:37; 24:31; John 11:52). "I will build my assembly", he said, "and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). His mission was to gather the scattered sheep of the house of Israel, to be their Good Shepherd, to save them, to lead them, to feed and protect them as God's flock. More than this, according to the Old Testament promise, Jesus' purpose was also to gather the nations into his great assembly; he had other sheep "not of this sheep pen" so that "there will be one flock and one shepherd" (John 10:14-16).

15. Just as God redeemed the people of Israel from Egypt, and gathered them to himself at Sinai, so he has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved Son (Col. 1:13). Through Christ's atoning death and glorious resurrection, he won pardon and deliverance once for all, and ascended to heaven to sit at God's right hand as his people's mediator and advocate (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25-27). In him, his people have boldness of access to the throne of God himself, and are gathered around that throne in the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22-24).

16. What is the character of this assembly that Jesus Christ is building, and how is it being built?

17. **Christ's assembly is built as people from all nations are gathered into it by the Word and the Spirit.** Jesus came to call people to get ready for his assembly, and to become members of it now. He came, in other words, to proclaim the gospel that the kingdom of God is coming, and that now is the time to repent and receive forgiveness of sins so that we may enter it (Mark 1:15). This was also the mission of the twelve, who were called to assist Jesus in his work of gathering the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matt. 4:19; 10:1-15), and eventually to preach "repentance and the forgiveness of sins" in Christ's name to all nations (Luke 24:47). This is how Jesus is now building his great assembly, as the Word of God is preached and people by the Spirit of God are enabled to respond to him in repentance and faith (Acts 11:18; 1 Cor. 2:12-13; 12:3; Eph. 2:18). They are now citizens of heaven and members of the heavenly assembly, having a guaranteed inheritance with all the saints, with God's own Spirit given to us as a guarantee of what is to come (Phil. 3:20-21; Eph. 1:11-14; Heb. 12:22-24).

18. **Christ's assembly is heavenly, and will be revealed in the age to come, the new creation.** The assembly Jesus is building is in heaven, where he is (Col. 3:1-4). The New Testament looks forward to the day of Christ's return, when the holy city, the new Jerusalem, will come down out of heaven from God, and the dwelling place of God will be with his people (Rev. 21:1-4). In this age of resurrection, God's great purpose to gather a holy people to himself will finally be complete, and those gathered will rejoice in the victory of God in Christ, and enjoy the eternal fellowship of the Son with Father in the Spirit (Rom. 8:33-39; Rev. 7:13-17).

19. This heavenly and ultimate assembly is represented by various images in the New Testament—for example, the mature form to which a body grows (Eph. 4:16); the final glory of a newly built temple (Eph. 2:20-22); the beauty of a gloriously constructed city (Rev. 21:2). God's ultimate purpose will involve a gathering from every nation, tribe, people and language in his presence (Rev. 7:9).

20. **Christ's assembly is seen now in the assemblies of Christians.** When we respond to the word of God, all believers now have access to the Father in one Spirit through Jesus Christ (Eph. 2:18). As the barrier between sinners and God is demolished through the cross, so barriers between people are broken down (cf. Eph. 2:14) and they are united as members of the household of God (Eph. 2:19). When the gospel is heard in a particular place, those who respond in repentance and faith will be drawn to each other by the new relationship with God they share. Whatever differences there may have been between them now seem insignificant in the light of what they now have in common: they are united in Christ as members of his heavenly assembly, children of the same heavenly Father, partakers of the one Spirit. When they meet there is a deep bond between them generated by the gospel (2 Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 3:6; Phil. 2:1-2). As the gospel continues to be preached in the power of the Spirit, and others are converted, they too will be

called by the Word and Spirit to join the assembly, as will existing believers (originally from other assemblies) who move into that area.

21. The New Testament shows us this theological truth in action. From the very beginning, Christian believers met together. Those who responded to Peter's preaching on the Day of Pentecost "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42), purposefully and frequently assembling in different places (in the temple and in their homes, v. 46). Wherever the gospel of Christ went, assemblies were formed, meeting in households (1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:5) and in larger groups (1 Cor. 14:23).

22. Thus, when Christians meet together now in the midst of a groaning creation, each particular gathering is both a *manifestation* of our union with Christ and each other before God's throne in the heavenly realms and an *anticipation* of the ultimate assembly of God's people around his throne in a renewed creation. These gatherings are therefore unique among all human assemblies. They have been gathered by the triune God himself, who is powerfully present in them.

23. **Christian assemblies are markedly different from Old Testament assemblies because of the fulfilment of God's promise in Christ.** Some Christian traditions, often taking their cues from a direct application of Old Testament texts, have based the practice of Christian assembly on notions of holy places, holy persons, holy times and/or holy rites (perhaps thinking of a church building as a 'sanctuary', a Christian minister as a 'priest', Sunday as 'the Lord's Day', and/or the liturgy as a 'service' to God). While Christian assemblies naturally involve places, persons, times and acts, these things no longer have the particular importance they did for Old Testament Israel. This is because of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus has brought the true cleansing that the practices of the Law elaborately foreshadowed. The Law made some provision for sins, but Jesus won forgiveness once and for all time. The Law dealt with the uncleanness associated with death, but Jesus dealt with death itself. In him the temple has been replaced (e.g. John 2:19-22), the priesthood has been superseded (e.g. Heb. 7:11), and the festivals and rituals have been fulfilled (e.g. 1 Cor. 5:7).

24. Christian assemblies can take place anywhere, do not require the presence of any particular person, can occur at any time on any day and do not involve any essential ritual. Christians do not have a place on earth to which they must come to worship (cf. John 4:21-24); the only priest they need is Jesus Christ, and he is in heaven (Heb. 8:1-6; 9:11-14; 10:19-23); and there is no need to observe particular days (Rom. 14:5; Gal. 4:9-11) or rites (Col. 2:16, 17; Heb. 10:1). Jesus Christ himself is our access to God the Father ("the way"), the revelation of God to us ("the truth") and God's grace towards us ("the life", John 14:6).

25. **Christian assemblies now are imperfect.** Like all things in this age, earthly Christian assemblies will not be (and ought not to expect to be) perfect representations of the heavenly and ultimate assembly. Christian gatherings now may expect unbelievers to be present (1 Cor. 14:23), and should welcome them. As Christians meet, humility, gentleness, patience and forbearance are needed (Eph. 4:2), for sin is yet to be finally done away with, and suffering is yet to be finally removed. As members of the gathering experience the various trials and sufferings of life in this world, God's people learn how to "bear one another's burdens", experiencing a fellowship enriched by a desire not only "to rejoice with those who rejoice", but also "to weep with those who weep".

26. In summary, a Christian assembly is unique among human gatherings. It is made up of those who have been called together by the gospel and who share in the Holy Spirit. For while the gospel addresses individuals, it calls us into fellowship with one another. More fundamentally, however, we are called into fellowship with God himself. Christian fellowship, therefore, has both 'vertical' (Godward) and 'horizontal' (one another) dimensions. Thus, when Christians assemble we both meet with God in the presence of one another and meet with one another in the presence of God. A Christian assembly also has an 'already and not-yet' character to it: it both manifests the present heavenly assembly (for we are already "in Christ") and anticipates the end-time assembly (when we will be "with Christ" in the new creation).

II. What are the purposes of a Christian assembly?

27. It is important to see a Christian assembly as a consequence of God's purpose and work. This stands in contrast to those approaches which see the assembly as primarily a human activity of 'service' to God, a means of accessing his grace, or even an occasion 'put on' by the minister for people to attend. God gathers his people to himself as an act of grace. Therefore, when Christians assemble together their purposes need to be shaped by God's purposes in drawing them together.

(a) As a testimony to Christ

28. When Christians meet together, the very fact of their gathering testifies to the gracious purposes of God. As we have seen, the gathering is a *divine achievement* even if it is also a *human activity*. Thus, by its very existence and life the assembly testifies to the goodness and grace of God.

29. In a remarkable passage Paul wrote of God's plan to make known "the manifold wisdom of God" to "the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places" (Eph. 3:10). Paul says that this is to be accomplished "through the assembly" of those who now have confident access to the Father through faith in Christ (v. 12). This includes the assembly of Christians now, where Jews and Gentiles are fellow heirs and members of the same body (v. 6). It is not that the marvellous wisdom of God is to be displayed by some activity of the Christian assembly, but by the fact or existence of the assembly, i.e. that God has acted by the Spirit to create a new humanity in the Lord Jesus. The phenomenon of Jews and Gentiles united in one body, "with all humility and gentleness, with patience, accepting one another in love," (Eph. 4:2) anticipates the ultimate restoration of humanity in the great assembly of Christ. This is the great display of God's wisdom to the spiritual powers.

30. Another dimension to this witness is found in Jesus' prayer in John 17. The world will know that the Father has sent the Son by the unity of those who believe in Jesus (John 17:23). This unity arises from being united through the apostolic word about the Father's great love given in Jesus Christ (John 17:20–21), and this love in turn creates an observable unity among believers. "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). All this reinforces the point that the Christian gathering is a divine achievement that testifies to God's wisdom and grace.

31. Just as the word of the gospel creates this united, loving assembly, so too the assembly continues to be nurtured as the "word of Christ" dwells richly in its midst, through many different ways, from teaching to hymn singing (Col. 3:16). Thus, the assembly testifies to the work of God in Christ, not simply by its existence, but also explicitly in all aspects and activities of its life together.

(b) *For fellowship in Christ*

32. Christians meet together because by God's grace they belong together. They have all heard the one gospel, received the same Spirit, and been united as many members in the one body of the Son. They meet to share in the life of God together. As Jesus explains in the parable of the vine, branches live in the vine because they receive life from the vine (John 15:4). Alternatively we might say that the vine shares its life with the branches. The disciples receive life from Jesus by receiving the Spirit from him (John 14:11). The disciples live in Jesus because they have Jesus' Spirit in them. This is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14).

33. Christian "fellowship" may at times be too easily reduced to a particular notion of Christian friendship. It is in fact based on the reality of sharing in Christ together by the Spirit, even as we groan together in a groaning world. This will undoubtedly have personal aspects in face to face relationships, but when assembled together Christians also participate in something beyond themselves. Fundamentally they hear and respond to God in Christ together, as his word dwells richly among them.

34. Christians are always in fellowship or sharing with each other and the Father through the Spirit (Eph. 2:18) because they all are members of the heavenly assembly of Christ. They have believed the apostolic witnesses and share in the apostles' fellowship with the Father and the Son (John 17:20–23; 1 John 1:2–3).

35. Nevertheless, the New Testament also speaks of a particular sharing or fellowship together in Christ in the Christian assembly here on earth. Matthew 18:20 and 1 Corinthians 5:3–5 indicate that the Lord Jesus Christ is present in power when his people gather in his name. While these passages have a particular focus on the Christians meeting in the name of Christ to make decisions about discipline, the promise of Christ's presence would seem to apply to any assembly in the name of the Lord. Indeed this presence may even be recognised by an unbeliever who hears the word of God spoken in the assembly (1 Cor. 14:24–25; cf. 1 Thess. 1:5; 2:13). It is not surprising, then, that Christian assemblies may be referred to as the temple of God (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16).

36. The nature of God's presence with his people is spiritual; that is, the Father and the Son are present by the Holy Spirit (John 14:18ff; Eph. 2:22). This presence is intimately connected to the words of Jesus abiding in the believers (John 14:25–26; 15:7). Word and Spirit, therefore, are inseparable. When Christian people are "filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18), the word of Christ dwells richly amongst them (Col. 3:16). Then there is "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control" (Gal. 5:22f). When the brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus display the fruit of the Spirit in this way they display their membership in the household of God.

(c) *For building toward maturity in Christ*

37. Christians are members now of the heavenly assembly, and yet we still live in the midst of a fallen world, groaning and longing for the final redemption of our bodies. A Christian assembly, therefore, is not static, but dynamic; it is in the process of *being built* (or traditionally, 'edified'). This growth, or building, involves both numerical growth and a growing in maturity and depth of relationship in Christ. The New Testament expresses the continual forward movement of Christian assemblies by a variety of metaphors which convey a sense of change, such as a growing body (Eph. 4:16; Col. 2:19), or a fruitful field (1 Cor. 3:9), or a temple that is being built (1 Cor. 3:9; Eph. 2:21; 1 Pet. 2:5). Christian assemblies require further building until they are presented before Christ perfect on the last day (Col. 1:28).

38. We have already noted that Jesus Christ is building his assembly, one which even death will not overcome (Matt. 16:18). The growth of his assembly is assured, because 'God gives the growth' (1 Cor. 3:6, 7; Col. 2:19). Even at the present time, the risen Christ continues to do this work, gathering people into his heavenly assembly, and he will be engaged in this task until it is completed in the resurrection, when he will then hand the kingdom over to the Father (see 1 Cor. 15:24–28).

39. Just as Jesus spoke of 'building' his assembly, so the apostle speaks of the Corinthian assembly as a building—but one in the process of construction (1 Cor. 3:9). For Paul, the assembly must be built on the foundation laid by the apostles, and this foundation is Christ himself (1 Cor. 3:10–11). However, it is not only the apostles who build the assembly, but each member in their own way will have a role in its construction (Eph. 4:16). There are a variety of roles people can play in the building of the assembly, but each person must keep in mind that the verdict of the final day will be the ultimate test of whether they have built well, or built poorly. It is possible to act in ways that do not build the assembly, but, in fact, destroy it (1 Cor. 3:12–17).

40. Whether something 'builds' (or 'destroys') is also the test that ought to govern the life and activities of the assembly itself. As Paul put it, everything should be done so that the assembly is built (1 Cor. 14:5). Believers meet

together in order to be built in faith, hope and love, encouraging each other as the day draws near (cf. Acts 2:42; Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25).

41. The growth of the assembly involves the growth of individuals as well as their mutual relationships. The Christian is built (or 'edified') by growing more deeply and more effectively in those things by which they became a Christian in the first place. "As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (Col. 2:6-7). This involves three distinct but deeply related elements: growing in knowledge, growing in trust and growing in Christian character (Gal. 5:6, Eph. 4:21). Growing in knowledge through understanding more deeply the Lord Jesus Christ and the gospel (Col. 2:2-3, Eph. 3:16-19; 4:15), leads to growing in trust (Col. 2:2). This grasping hold of the Lord Jesus Christ in turn produces the fruit of Christian character, which walks worthily in the calling to which it was called (Eph. 4:1), putting off the old humanity and putting on the new (Col. 3:9-10).

(d) *For evangelism?*

42. As we have seen, the Christian assembly functions as a testimony by its very existence and activities, and it welcomes the outsider into its midst (1 Cor. 14:16, 23-25). Furthermore, since the gospel word will always be spoken in the assembly (see further below), believers and unbelievers alike will regularly hear the gospel there (cf. Rom. 1:11-14).

43. However, in the New Testament, the Christian assembly itself is characteristically the fruit of evangelism, not its agent. Evangelism primarily takes place outside of the assembly. The gospel is boldly proclaimed in synagogue, prison and marketplace, and where all Christians do whatever they can to win the salvation of others (1 Cor. 10:31-11:1), including everyday gospel conversations with outsiders (Col. 4:2-4; 1 Pet. 3:15).

44. Proclaiming the gospel for the purpose of the conversion of unbelievers is not then the primary purpose of the Christian assembly. But if the assembly is functioning well, it will further this gospel work by building outward-looking, mission-minded Christians, who will spontaneously take the gospel to the world (1 Thess. 1:8). Members of the assembly will naturally be partners in gospel work, with each other and with Christians from other assemblies (cf. Phil. 1:5, 7, 14; 4:15). For the sake of this work, assemblies may send some of their members to take the gospel elsewhere (cf. Acts 13:1-3).

III. What ought assembled Christians do?

45. The question of what Christians should do when they meet together needs to be seen in the context of (1) what God *has done* (he has gathered them to himself in Christ) and (2) what God *is doing* (gathering his people around his word, addressing them and transforming them into the image of his Son). God's action is not only prior to our action in time. His action is what determines the shape and life of the assembly. For this reason, it is crucial that we realise the most important aspect of the meeting is *what God does* rather than what we do. God is not a passive observer of the Christian's decision to assemble with others. Jesus promised to be present 'where two or three are gathered in my name' (Matt. 18:20). He is not a silent observer of the assembly either. His voice is heard as the Scriptures are read (1 Pet. 1:25; 2 Pet. 1:20-21; 2 Cor. 13:3). There is, then, an important sense in which all that we do when we gather is a response to what God has said and done.

46. What assembled Christians do together thus flows directly out of God's purposes for their gathering.

(a) *Be a testimony to Christ*

47. The first thing Christians 'do' when they assemble is accomplished by the very act of getting together. The Christian assembly is, by its very existence, a testimony to the manifold wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10). However, this wisdom is especially displayed as Jesus' disciples love one another with the same sacrificial love with which he has loved them (John 13:34; Eph. 4:1-3; 5:1-2). Therefore, whatever is done when Christians gather must be done in love. Love is patient with the failings of others, and kind towards those in need. It is not envious of the contribution of others, nor is it proud or boastful of its own contribution. Love is not angered by being overlooked, and forgets any slight or disagreement. Love protects the sanctity of the gathering while trusting those who actively participate. It always hopes for God's grace to be manifest in the gathering, and perseveres when such blessing is not obvious (cf. 1 Cor. 13:5-7). Such love, which is born of the Spirit (Rom. 15:30; Gal. 5:22), is the proof that men and women know God, have been given new birth and are obedient to the truth (1 John 4:7; 1 Pet. 1:22). By loving one another Christians demonstrate that their gatherings are genuinely Christian.

48. When Christians come together "as a congregation" (1 Cor. 11:18 NEB), they have also traditionally testified to their fellowship together through eating "the Lord's meal" (1 Cor. 11:20). In the ancient world, meals were a common human expression of fellowship, to signal the diners' participation in some activity, occupation, or religious rite. When the Greeks ate their temple meals, they participated in idol worship (regarded as demonic by both the Jews and the apostle [1 Cor. 10:20]). When the Israelites ate a sacrificial meal, such as the Passover, they participated in the benefits of the sacrifice. When the Christian assembly ate a meal of bread and wine together (Jew and Gentile, male and female, slave and free), it was to demonstrate and proclaim that they participated together in the body and blood of Christ; that is, the benefits won for them at the cross. Eating and drinking together was only possible because Christ had brought them all together; he was the true bread in which they participated (1 Cor. 10:17). "Christ our Passover has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7), and his death has brought the assembly together. For this reason it is necessary that believers behave considerately towards each other. This requires properly "discerning the body" (cf. 1 Cor. 11:29)—i.e., recognising the needs of those who gather and their identity as those for whom Christ died. In other words, it is only through displaying united Christian love in sharing this meal together that the assembly will "proclaim Christ's death until he comes" (1 Cor. 11:26).

49. The gatherings of God's people around God's word are highly significant occasions in the accomplishment of God's purposes, and so are not to be taken lightly. Christians should be encouraged to persist in assembling, because this simple concrete action is itself a profound witness and testimony to a society or culture that does not understand the things of God. In some situations and places, it may be a very costly witness. In such a society, wisdom is required to discern true and helpful Christian assemblies in which to participate.

(b) *Fellowship in Christ*

50. Because Christians meet for fellowship in Christ, much of what they do will be a *sharing together* in the fundamental Christian response to God in Christ—to listen to his word and respond in humble repentance and joyful faith.

51. They will share, for example, in **confession**. Confession in the New Testament means the open and verbal acknowledgement of the truth about Jesus and ourselves. We confess with our mouths that Jesus is the Lord Christ, the Son of God, who saves and gives eternal life (Rom. 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 12:3; 1 John 4:2). And we also confess that we are inveterate sinners in need of forgiveness (1 John 1:8-10; Jas. 5:16). Confession only has meaning in the presence of witnesses (1 Tim. 6:12), and so when Christians gather they testify to one another of what is in their hearts—both of the sin that remains with us, and of our faith in the Lord Jesus for pardon and forgiveness.

52. When they gather Christians will also share together in **prayer**, which is verbalized faith. Prayer is a basic feature of the Christian life of faith. It is no less a foundational feature of congregational life. As we pour out our requests and petitions to the Father, we are giving vital expression to our trust in his sovereign power, in his goodness, and in his gracious promises to us in the gospel. When God's people gather, they will pray in faith for each other (Jas. 5:15; Acts 4:23-31), for the progress of the gospel (2 Thess. 3:1) and for all people (1 Tim. 2:1) in the light of God's coming kingdom (Matt. 6:9-13).

53. When Christians assemble, they are also bound to respond to the gospel word with corporate **praise and thanksgiving**, in speech and in song. The Spirit-filled assembly will overflow with grateful and joyful speech, as we sing to one another, and as our hearts make melody to the Lord (Eph. 1:3-14; 5:19-20), giving thanks for all the blessings that we have received from his hand (1 Cor. 14:16; Phil. 3:1; 4:10).

54. Christian fellowship is often expressed in a range of very **practical ways**. For example, Christians often have news to report to one another—particularly news concerning the progress of the gospel. We see this at various points in the book of Acts; indeed often the sharing of such news is the expressed reason for gathering (e.g., Acts 4:4:23ff; 14:27ff; 21:17ff). Believers also assembled to commission, send, and farewell one another (Acts 13:3; 15:4; 18:27-28; 20:1-3; 17ff; 21:5-6). All of this suggests that making announcements, reporting news and commissioning labourers for God's harvest are valid and important activities for Christian assemblies.

55. When God's grace in Jesus Christ penetrates the hearts of his people, **generosity** of all kinds flows out to those who are objects of our love. One expression of this generosity and love will be Christian giving, as those with much are moved to help those with little. In the New Testament period, the Gentile Christians assisted the Jewish congregations ('the saints') from whom the gospel had come to them. Although the 'laying aside' of money was the responsibility of 'each of you' (1 Cor. 16:2), the gatherings were also reminded of their corporate responsibilities in this area (2 Cor. 8:9). Congregations in various localities provided for those who brought them the word of God (1 Cor. 9:1-12; 1 Tim. 5:17-18). Part of the fellowship that existed between congregations was financial support for gospel work that was launched by one congregation, but experienced by another (cf. Phil. 1:5 4:10-19). Because of this network of giving and receiving of gospel blessings and benefits mediated through others, the collection and distribution of money is an important and significant part of the Christian gathering.

(c) *Build toward maturity in Christ*

56. The assembly is called into being through the word of God. Not surprisingly, it is this same word that dwells in and *builds* the assembly (Acts 20:32; Eph. 4:15-16; Col. 3:16). Therefore, if the assembly is to grow and be built, hearing God's word must be central. This is indeed what we see repeatedly in the New Testament. From the very beginning the early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42), to "the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching" (1 Tim. 4:13; Col. 4:16; 1 Thess. 5:27). In this way, the New Testament assemblies sought to live "by every word which comes from the mouth of God" (Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4).

57. God's word is normally heard as his people speak it to one another, and this is a responsibility and privilege given to all God's people (1 Thess. 4:18; Heb. 3:13). Paul urges all of the Ephesians to speak the truth in love to one another, and thus to grow in maturity and unity in Christ (Eph. 4:15-16). Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul wants all the believers to play their part in building the assembly, particularly through intelligible, encouraging words (such as prophecy). Singing "psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (i.e., speaking God's word melodically) is also described by Paul as a powerful way of teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom so that the word of Christ might dwell richly among God's chosen ones (Col. 3:16; cf. Eph. 5:19). In all these different 'word' contributions by members of the Christian assembly, the essential criterion is that they be "for building" (1 Cor. 14:26), and the manner of their exercise is to be "decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40).

58. While all Christians build the assembly as they "speak the truth in love" (Eph. 4:15), the New Testament nevertheless preserves a vital role for teachers, overseers and elders—those who are to "hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught," so that they might be "able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (Tit. 1:9). In the post-apostolic age, those who shepherd the flock of God are guardians of the gospel word (2 Tim. 1:13-14), solemnly charged with preaching, teaching and passing on the faith once for all delivered to the saints (2 Tim.

2:1-2, 15; 4:1-2; Tit. 2:15; Heb. 13:7, 17; Jas. 3:1; Jude 3). Such teaching must therefore be central to the Christian assembly for its ongoing growth towards maturity, and its fidelity to the gospel.

59. In summary, assembled Christians build the assembly by prayerfully proclaiming God's word, and by encouraging and exhorting one another to respond to the word in repentance and faith, to persevere in the hope to which we are called, to love and serve one another, and to grow in godliness as we wait for the coming Day of the Lord (Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25).

Conclusion: How should this theology shape contemporary Christian assemblies?

60. Christians assemble today at many different places and times—from large Sunday morning assemblies to small group meetings in homes to informal gatherings around a hospital bed. Whatever the setting, what makes these various gatherings *Christian* assemblies is that they are called together by God through his Word and Spirit for three special purposes: to be a testimony to Christ, to fellowship in Christ and to build towards maturity in Christ. And whatever the particular occasions of the gatherings, what happens in them should be driven by these purposes of God.

61. This way of thinking profoundly shaped the Anglican formularies. The Book of Common Prayer (BCP) envisaged a great variety of Christian gatherings—Morning and Evening Prayer (for daily corporate Bible reading and prayer, usually with no sermon), the Litany (for Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays), the Communion, the churching of women, baptism, comminations, burials, ordinations, and so on. These various gatherings suited particular occasions or needs, and so had different emphases. But all them were built upon a distinctively biblical, Reformed view of the gospel and the Christian life in which hearing the word of God and responding in repentance and faith, thanksgiving and prayer were the central features.

62. Against the Roman Catholicism of the day, Archbishop Thomas Cranmer believed that sinners are justified not as a process but by God's declaration, based on the cross of Christ and embraced by living faith in his promise, which is itself a work of the Spirit. Christian growth proceeds in the same way—by the Spirit of God working through the agency of the Word of God to transform the heart and stir the affections to the love of God and neighbour. This is why so much of the BCP is built around systematic Bible reading, and why so many of the collects are requests for God's gracious power to transform us in holiness.

63. However, it was not only in its component parts that the BCP showed its theological colours. It also sought to provide gospel-shaped, well-ordered patterns for Christian assemblies. In the Reformation context, the construction of these orders was an exercise in careful theological thought and discrimination. It meant getting rid of some old and unprofitable practices, but retaining others "because they pertain to edification, whereunto all things done in the Church (as the Apostle teacheth) ought to be referred" ("Of Ceremonies, why some be abolished and some retained").

64. This is still our task as Anglicans today. Some of the particular patterns and orders constructed by Cranmer may now be considered "old and unprofitable." But the purpose and theology of BCP must be retained, because it is profoundly biblical. We must think carefully about the order and content of our gatherings, so that everything in them be done in a decent and orderly way to fulfil the gospel purposes of God (as outlined above).

65. To aid that task, and on the basis of the theology of Christian assembly elucidated above, the commission makes the following recommendations to those charged with planning and leading Christian assemblies.

66. Every Christian assembly, whether large or small, temporary or permanent, occasional or regular, should be ordered around hearing Christ's Word, and responding to it in faith, obedience and loving fellowship with God and each other. Every assembly should thus include the speaking and hearing of the word of God, and a shared response to it of prayer and thanksgiving.

67. Not every assembly should try to do this in the same way or with the same component parts, nor in the same style. An assembly of 20, for example, will provide different opportunities for individuals to speak God's word to one another and offer mutual exhortation, than an assembly of 150. Similarly, size and context will usually affect the level of formality in a gathering—the easy-going informality of a home Bible study group will be different from the greater degree of organization and structure required for an assembly of 200. However, regardless of style, context, size and culture, all assemblies should **build** toward maturity in Christ by prayerfully speaking his word, **fellowship** in Christ as we listen to and respond to his word, and be a **testimony** to Christ by our love and unity.

68. In planning and leading the regular Sunday assemblies that are the most common feature of our corporate life, we would do well to consider the entire time we are gathered as 'the assembly'. In particular, the common practice of having 'the formalities', preceded by the various activities of arriving and being welcomed, and followed by morning tea/supper, should not be regarded as delineating 'the service' from the 'fellowship'. Instead, we should give careful thought to how the different phases of the gathering could most usefully fulfil our purposes in being together. For example, it is not easy to help busy, distracted people to turn their attention to the God who is addressing us and to whom we bring our prayers. During the whole time we are together, from arrival to departure, how might we speak God's word to each other, and respond to him together—in a larger group, in smaller groups over food, and informally one-to-one?

69. Many Anglican assemblies no longer use orders of service from the BCP (or more recent Anglican prayer books). This can lead to a lack of thought about the nature, order and flow of what is done, and a corresponding loss of coherence and effectiveness in fulfilling the purposes for which God has gathered us. There is a gospel logic and rhythm to the BCP orders of service—a trajectory or movement that stirs the heart with the love of God, and provides for fitting response. Many contemporary gatherings lack this—one thing simply follows another, without apparent logic or flow. The

relationship between the various components remains unclear. In some assemblies, this loss of gospel coherence leading to a response of the heart has been replaced with other means of stirring the affections (most usually music). Another aspect of the structure of the BCP that is often lost is comprehensiveness over time—the benefit of systematically reading through large sections of the Bible, saying the psalms to each other, and praying for a wide range of concerns using different forms of prayer. It is a matter of urgency that a new range of ‘templates for Christian assembly’ be prepared to provide guidance and resources for planning and leading different kinds of Christian assembly—from that of the whole congregation, to smaller gatherings in homes, to daily family gatherings for Bible reading and prayer.

70. In recommending that theologically-driven care and thought should go into the ordering of our assemblies, we are advocating neither novelty for its own sake, nor the practice of empty ceremony and ritual. As Cranmer himself put it, “Christ’s Gospel is not a Ceremonial Law (as much of Moses’ Law was,) but it is a Religion to serve God, not in bondage of the figure or shadow, but in the freedom of the Spirit” (from ‘Of Ceremonies’). The theologically rich resources of the BCP—its thanksgivings and prayers, in particular—should be appreciated and appropriated for use within a variety of contemporary assemblies.

71. Christian assemblies should not be designed to interest, entertain, attract or intrigue non-Christians. This is not their purpose. The influential ‘seeker-service’ movement of the past two decades has not always appreciated this. That being said, if an assembly is being planned and run in accordance with the purposes of God (testimony, fellowship, building), and in a manner that is intelligible for the Christians attending and authentic to the realities of human life in this suffering world, then it will be the kind of assembly that does welcome outsiders, and is intelligible and edifying for all.

On behalf of the Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission

JOHN WOODHOUSE

Chairman

4 September 2008

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In contributing fully and fraternally to the discussion and processes of the Doctrine Commission, the Rev Canon Dr Ivan Head wished to note the following minority comments that express his thematic concerns about the emphasis of the Report and which he expressed consistently as a minority voice.

Minority Comment

by the Rev Canon Dr Ivan Head

- 1 I remain concerned that the vocabulary of assembly, the universal use of the word ‘assembly’ will cause the vocabulary of church and church-going to disappear or drop from common usage. I feel that this will have negative consequences for a Diocese and city in which the language of Church and church expresses ‘the mind of the people and culture’. The word assembly is preferred and used almost universally in the Report while the cognate term ‘church’ is supplanted. Whether “ministers among the assembly of God” will do for us what “priest or presbyter in Church” will not, remains of real concern to me. The Diocesan Mission Statement uses the word ‘church’ and not the word ‘assembly’. The Report’s preferred usage is seen in its translation of Matthew 16:18 as “Thou art Peter and on this Rock I shall build my assembly”.
- 2 I feel that the Report in places overemphasises dissonance between the Old Covenant and New and does not allow sufficient value to the Christian practice, custom and development of itself sanctifying and hallowing times, places, seasons and even personal offices. The Report, tends to render partly invisible any Church building or season or person other than those that can be defended in a ‘functional’ way of convenience or necessity. This is clearly seen in paragraph 23 which reads in part

While Christian assemblies naturally involve places, persons, times and acts, these things no longer have the particular importance they did for Old Testament Israel. This is because of the person and work of Jesus Christ. Jesus has brought the true cleansing that the practices of the Law elaborately foreshadowed. The Law made some provision for sins, but Jesus won forgiveness once and for all time.

In my opinion this undermines a proper emphasis on such profoundly important Church days such as Good Friday and indeed Christmas and it ignores the human givens that people are asked to make specific time and set aside specific time for worship. In my opinion, it is just as important for a Christian to be in Church on Sunday as it was for a Jewish person to gather in the Synagogue. I do not think we should undermine that in any way - or fewer people will find their way into Anglican Church buildings in this Diocese. Replacing the word Church with the word assembly will not help the Church.

Ivan Head

4 September 2008