

# Dinner to mark the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St Andrew's Presbyterian Church, Canberra

Canberra Yacht Club 20<sup>th</sup> September 2024

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1. Members and friends of St. Andrew's, Canberra, thank you all for the privilege of being guest speaker at this special occasion in the life of St Andrew's – the church at the heart of the nation with the nation at its heart. I am a bit slower in my delivery since I had major surgery for cancer of the jaw (a John Farnham episode) 2 years ago. Since then I have had a dribble that is difficult to control and with due respect to Barry Humphries I feel a bit like Sir Les Paterson at times. If my wife were here (and she apologises because she has her own health difficulties at the moment) she would be giving me sign messages which does not mean to stop talking and sit down but rather to wipe my chin.
2. I am almost a twin of St Andrew's and last Sunday I became 5 years younger than your congregation. The history of St Andrew's is tied up with the history of Canberra itself. As we know the siting of the proposed national capital was a bone of contention until in 1908 a final decision was made. King O'Malley, a colourful federal parliamentarian, was one of those who opposed Canberra as the site favouring Dalgety, Tooma and Bombala before the final ballot came down in favour of Canberra.
3. In Melbourne on 8 October 1903 O'Malley made a speech to the House of Representatives extolling the virtues of Bombala as the site for the national capital. He said 'I hope that the site selected will be Bombala, and that the children of our children will see an Australian federal city that will rival London in population, Paris in beauty, Athens in culture, and Chicago in enterprise.' But as we know Bombala was not to become the centre of the universe for our nation.
4. But as the site of the new capital was contentious so also was the name to be given to the city. Some suggestions were: "Cookaburra", "Wheatwoolgold", "Swindleville", "Gonebroke" and "Myola". Myola was rejected as it sounded like an anagram of O'Malley. Ultimately, though, temptation was resisted and the name "Canberra", deriving from a local Aboriginal word for "meeting place" was selected. (Fullilove p.6)

5. O'Malley was a flamboyant, colourful character who sometimes claimed to have been born in Canada but most often claimed his birthplace as the USA. He is the main character in a 1970 musical play *The Legend of King O'Malley*. He had a religious bent and claimed to be the First Bishop of the church of the Rockbound Water Lily in Kansas where he lived most of his time whilst in the USA. He used to have an angel appear and make pronouncements which claimed to be from God. All went well until some of his followers found the angel drunk in a town nearby and O'Malley had to flee. Historians suggest that O'Malley's interest in religion came because the state of Kansas at the time made land grants to religious organisations much as glebes were given out to churches in Australia in the 1830's. He escaped to Australia first to Queensland, then to South Australia, where he became a member of the state parliament, and then to Tasmania from which state he was elected to the first federal parliament in 1901.
6. In spite of his colourful career O'Malley is inseparable from the history of Canberra. He was Minister for Home Affairs under Prime Ministers Andrew Fisher and Billy Hughes. By the way Andrew Fisher was a good Presbyterian from Gympie in Queensland being the Sunday School Superintendent in that church. As Minister for Home Affairs O'Malley played a prominent role in the planning and development of Canberra. He declared American architect Walter Burley Griffin winner of the town planning competition. On 20 February 1913 he drove in the first peg to mark the start of the development of the city. He was also present at the ceremony for the naming of Canberra on 12 March 1913.
7. Canberra is a political city. Its purpose is to be the national capital and to serve the federal government and the people of the nation through that government whichever political party is in office at any given time. Michael Fullilove suggests that when the Parliament settled in Canberra in 1927 it became the national centre of speechifying. It is like Washington DC in this and unlike the other state and territory capitals in which settlers came first and then government and the politicians. The story of King O'Malley reminds us of the purpose of Canberra.
8. But before the politicians came the area of Canberra was already settled by people raising animals, sowing crops, tilling the soil and building communities. and where the people were there was the

church. The church is not necessarily a building, rather is it the gathering of the people of faith together. In my first parish as an ordained minister, I had eight preaching centres. There was a Presbyterian Church in town (Tumbarumba), four churches in other centres owned by either the Presbyterian or the Anglican church, one congregation gathered in a home, another in a community hall, where one had to clear the beer bottles and rubbish out from the night before so that we could have the service, and then there was a prison farm where we gathered for worship in a classroom in that institution. So it doesn't matter where we gather as long as we are gathered together for the purpose of worship and sharing in ministry one with the other. But of course, buildings help.

9. From the very beginning of this city the Presbyterian Church recognised the need for a suitable church building to be erected. But before that happened, we must give some attention to the situation before it was decided that Canberra was to be the site of the national capital. The Anglicans were in the area early and the first church building erected in the Limestone Plains or Canberry and Ginninderry, became the Church of St. John the Baptist which was the only visible sign of Christianity in the district for some years.
10. In his little book on the history of St Ninian's Church Lindsay Gardiner says this: 'Though the first church building was Anglican there were Presbyterians in the north Canberra district very early. Both Charles Campbell and William Davis in their efforts to overcome the labour shortage of the 1830's and early 1840's, when free workers were loath to travel into and work in the interior (nothing much has changed as we still find it difficult to get people to live and work in the regions), assisted the migration from Scotland of many shepherds, some of them with wives and families. These people were probably the nucleus of the later Presbyterian community in that area, but for many years they had no minister of their own, and no regular services.' (Gardiner pp.1-2)
11. Pioneering Presbyterian work was undertaken by the Rev. William Hamilton from Goulburn until after a few years a Presbyterian presence was established in the area. But the foundation of the city of Canberra gave new impetus for a national church, a cathedral church for Presbyterianism in the national capital. Even though our church polity does not allow for bishops there is a very real sense

in which a church building in this city would be of such stature that it would stand out as a beacon of Christian witness which it does now in its prominent site. Hamilton found his work in the Limestone Plains area not very encouraging because of the episcopalian (Anglican) interest. This sentiment was also conveyed in reports to the NSW General Assembly in the 1930's. However, Presbyterians were not to be denied.

12. The Presbyterian Church applied for Site No. 4, a triangular block about 3.5 acres just below Capital Hill and facing Wellington Avenue, one of the main entrances to the city. The Moderator General (Rt. Rev J. Crookston) reported to the 1926 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, the Commissioners were prepared to allot the site to our Church, subject to conditions of lease agreement for ecclesiastical purposes. Block value of 6.000 pounds and lease of 99 years. *The site is a magnificent one for the Church purposes and we will be expected to put on it, as we ought, buildings worthy of the Capital of Australia and of our Church.*' (Rowe & Aitken p.5)
13. Through various stages from the laying of the foundation stone on 27 November 1929 by the Governor-General, Lord Stonehaven, to the opening of the partially completed church on 22 September 1934 by the Governor-General, Sir Isaac Isaacs, the building of the church was watched with interest throughout the nation as the Rev. John Walker helped to raise funds for its construction with the authority of the General Assembly of Australia. In 1948 it was reported to the General Assembly of Australia that the total liability for the church of St. Andrew in Canberra stood at 26,350 pounds plus interest of 988 pounds.
14. The NSW Presbyterian in September 1934 in talking about the opening of St. Andrew's, said this: 'Canberra is an act of faith in the future of Australia, and a vote of confidence in the generations yet unborn.' (Rowe and Aitken p. 18) This promise still stands in the building of St Andrew's which glorifies God in the heart of this city.
15. Tasmania, Victoria and New South Wales had each paid its proportion of the liability and been freed from further responsibility regarding this debt. Queensland had declined to accept liability and the Committee was asked to consider sympathetically the question of giving some relief to the States of South Australia, Tasmania, and

Western Australia because of the financial strain arising from their acceptance of this debt, and Queensland was asked to reconsider the matter, and a committee was appointed to seek donations in Queensland to meet Queensland's proportion of the debt. Meanwhile Queensland had paid 200 pounds per annum for several years towards principal and interest. (White p. 287).

16. Since then St Andrew's has been greatly enriched by the completion of the Warriors' Chapel, the gifts of furnishings and financial contributions from individuals and other groups to enhance the rich building it has become. In a short 90 years (short when you consider that my last parish of North Sydney celebrated its 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year and my second last parish of Maitland this year celebrates the 197<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Presbyterian service in that city).
17. One can imagine the planning and discussion that went into the process of building particularly when there was not sufficient funds to complete the church to its original plan. If these stones could speak, they would tell of all that went on at that time and of the many stories since then of laughter and tears as people have gathered in its sanctuary to mark the passages of life, to share in its music and life, to hear the Bible read and expounded and to create a place of acceptance for  
people from all round the world who inevitably find themselves in positions in the national capital in embassies, parliament, government departments, defence force facilities and other positions.
18. Church Union came and went in 1977 without fulfilling its promise of making three churches into one. Instead, three churches became four. St Andrew's remained within the Presbyterian Church and has stood firm throughout those years with traditional worship and church music and support for the status of women in the ordination of women to the ministry and to the eldership. May it ever continue its emphasis on these things in the important role it plays in the life of the nation and in the life of the Church. We are now only a small church nationally with about 3.5% of the Australian population claiming to be Presbyterian and the idea of church and its role in the community has changed in the years since I began my ministry but the pastoral care of the church and the idea of the church being

a place of refuge and hope is still greatly important to the community.

19. Many people have served as ministers to this congregation – Hamilton and others in their pioneering work, Hain, Walker, Turnbull, Harrison, Baillie, Fullerton, Bartholomew and Campbell as well as others who have served as assistants. Harrison and Fullerton both served as Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in NSW and Harrison as Moderator-General of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia.
20. Harrison's ministry over many years was legendary and there are apocryphal stories told about it. He had an excellent relationship with Prime Minister John Curtin who was a Roman Catholic, also from Western Australia from whence Harrison came, and Harrison conducted Curtin's funeral in both Canberra and WA. I don't know whether Harrison had a similar relationship with Prime Minister Ben Chifley but when Chifley died in 1951 Fred Daly, the Labor Party humourist, is said to have asked whether a priest was called when Chifley died and whether the priest had got there in time. The answer would determine whether Chifley was to have a Catholic burial or not. David Day in his biography of Chifley says that the Church had lost Curtin and was not about to lose Chifley (Day p. 526). Chifley's wife, Elizabeth, was a Presbyterian and Chifley used to drive her to St. Stephen's Presbyterian Church, Bathurst, on a Sunday before going to his own church or to whatever function called for his presence that day.
21. Elizabeth Chifley left a large part of her estate to the Presbyterian Church in Bathurst.
22. Politics, people, ministers, buildings, early settlers, the founding of Canberra have all worked together to bring this church into being together with the vision and enthusiasm not only of the local people but the Presbyterians of the nation who also contributed financially and with interest. St. Andrew's stands as a beacon to the nation and to the federal Presbyterian Church as a witness to the proclamation of the Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ.
23. Plans for an extension of the nave of the church were prepared and on 22 September 1979 the Governor-General, Sir Zelman Cowen, opened the doors of the Peace Memorial Nave which act signified the completion of the church. To me there is a message in all this.

The church of St. Andrew is finished but it is not finished! The original plan was not completed because of financial restraints and a modified plan was adopted. Herein is a parable. The work of Christ is finished and He has achieved our salvation through the cross but our work of proclaiming this salvation is never finished while there is ever only one human being who has not been reached with the Gospel. Finished yet unfinished!

24. Throughout my life and my ministry two passages of Scripture have helped to sustain me through good times and difficult times. Firstly from Psalm 139:7-10 (RSV): 'Where shall I go from Your Spirit? Or where shall I escape from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there! If I take the wings of the morning and live in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there Your hand shall lead me, and Your right hand shall hold me.' Secondly from 1 Corinthians 15:28 (RSV): 'Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.' May you take these verses with you as individuals and as a congregation to proclaim the message of the finished work of Christ in the unfinished task of proclaiming the Gospel.

*Rev Dr Paul Logan*

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