

As it is now less than a year until the retirement of Archbishop Philip Freier, thoughts are turning to the impending election of the Diocese's next Father-in-God. It is only a matter of months until the Board of Nominators begins its task of selecting names to bring to an election Synod meeting.

With this in mind, Victorian Anglicans Together invited five members of the Board that met before the election in 2006 of Archbishop Freier – Michael Dowling, Muriel Porter, David Powys, Colin Reilly and Peter Sherlock – to share their experiences and insights with members of the forthcoming Board and Synod members at a forum held on 2 March. Muriel, who was Chair of the last Board, and Colin had been members of the previous Boards which met before the elections of Archbishop Keith Rayner and Archbishop Peter Watson as well.

The speakers focused on five key areas: the role of the Board; relationships across the Board; relationships with the Synod and Synod members; identifying and working with potential candidates; and preparing for the election Synod. Questions and comments were invited from the audience.

Several key themes emerged across the discussion.

It was noted that the work of the Board is very intensive. The last Board met 47 times over a 13-month period, and looked at 44 names in the second round alone. This involves extensive fact checking, speaking to referees, organising health and professional standards clearances, and much more. It is particularly time-consuming for the Board Chair. It also requires a high standard of confidentiality. This means that the Board members can feel quite isolated during the Board process, as they cannot discuss their deliberations with other Synod members, let alone family and friends.

The panellists reminded the audience that candidates do not apply to be Archbishop. Potential candidates can be reluctant to have their names considered, concerned that their willingness might be detrimental to their current ministry, particularly if their names come forward to an election Synod, where confidentiality is much harder – if not impossible – to guarantee. In fact, the point was made that in the world of social media, let alone email and text, it will probably be impossible to impose secrecy on the next election Synod. One speaker suggested it might be better to livestream the Synod deliberations so that at least room to disseminate inaccurate or false information is circumscribed. As well, livestreaming the sessions might curtail some of the unfortunate comments that occurred in the last election, when comments of a racist, sexist, homophobic and cruel nature were made.

All speakers agreed that this time women's names must be carefully considered. (The Appellate Tribunal decision opening the way for women bishops in our church did not come until the year after the last election Synod.) The hope was also expressed that people not already in episcopal orders should be considered, as well as local candidates who already know the diocese. One speaker urged that the selection of an archbishop should not come down to their view on a single issue such as same-sex.

The point was also made that the church's situation, and its role in Australian society, has changed drastically since 2006. Imaginative, creative leadership will be required. There was strong consensus that if possible, the Synod and the Diocese should be given the opportunity for a full discussion about the role of the Archbishop and what qualities and skills are needed for this very different environment. Perhaps an opportunity could be provided at the special June Synod meeting?

Finally, the panellists pointed out that discernment as to who God is calling to be Archbishop is not the Board's responsibility – it is the Synod's. What the Board needs to discern is who is capable, competent and Godly enough, and then who is electable.