General Synod – Constitution Alteration (Title of the Primate) Canon 1989 Assenting Ordinance 2026

Explanatory Statement

Purpose of the bill

1. The purpose of the Bill for the General Synod – Constitution Alteration (Title of the Primate) Canon 1989 Assenting Ordinance 2026 (**the Bill**) is to assent to the *Constitution Alteration (Title of the Primate) Canon 1989* (**the Canon**).

2. The Canon provides that the title of "Archbishop" is conferred on a Primate who is not also a metropolitan. The title confers no rights, powers or jurisdiction.

Recommendations

3. That Synod receive this report.

4. That Synod pass the Bill as an ordinance of the Synod.

Evidence Given

Background

5. The *Constitution Alteration (Title of the Primate) Canon 1989* (**Canon**) was passed by the General Synod on 24 August 1989.

6. The Canon amends the Constitution in the Schedule to the *Anglican Church of Australia Constitution Act 1961* (**the Constitution**) and does not come into effect unless and until at least three-quarters of the diocesan synods, including all the metropolitan sees, have assented to the Canon by ordinance and all such assents are in force at the same time.

7. The Canon has received assent, which remains in force, in 21 dioceses. Sydney and Willochra (SA) have not given assent. As this comprises more than three quarters of dioceses, and Sydney is the only remaining metropolitan see required to give assent, the effect of the Bill to assent to the Canon in Sydney will be to bring the Canon into operation, at a date to be set by the Primate.

Prior consideration by the Diocese of Sydney

8. The Canon was previously considered by the Standing Committee and the Synod in 1990. At that time, the Standing Committee recommended that the Canon not receive assent, and the Synod by resolution (4/90) agreed with this recommendation. After giving fresh consideration to the Canon, and considering the changes in circumstance since 1990, it is recommended that assent be given to the Canon.

9. When considering the arguments previously made against giving assent to this Canon, it is important to recall that they were made at a time when the election of a non-metropolitan Primate (i.e., a Primate who was not also an Archbishop) was a remote possibility and had never occurred. Much has changed in 36 years since the Canon was passed by the General Synod.

10. In 2020, for the first time, one of the final two candidates in the primatial election was a non-metropolitan diocesan bishop. In 2025, both final candidates were non-metropolitans, and for the first time, a non-metropolitan diocesan bishop was elected Primate. Non-metropolitan Primates may be an ongoing feature of the national church.

11. A non-metropolitan Primate aligns with Sydney's preference for a limited Primatial role, largely confined to Constitutionally-mandated duties such as chairing sessions of the General Synod. Nevertheless, the Primate does have a role in representing the Anglican Church of Australia in overseas contexts and the use of the courtesy title "Archbishop" in those contexts is helpful and appropriate.

12. In 1990, the report to Synod expressed concern about the 'proliferation of ecclesiastical titles' and the comment was made that it was 'not the title but the person who gives standing to the position'. There has been a shift in this view in Sydney in recent years, as a consequence of our engagement in GAFCON and related international contexts. There can be a strategic benefit in the judicious use of titles in some contexts, as is seen through the creation of a 'Bishop for International Relations' and the bestowing of honorary canonries where such a title can help the bearer commend the cause of the gospel in various places.

13. Another objection raised in 1990, and repeated in Synod resolution 4/90, is that the Canon is unnecessary due to an existing provision in the Constitution (s.8) whereby 'General Synod may by canon confer upon a bishop of a diocese the title of Archbishop'. This is, however, a somewhat circular objection, as *this* is the Canon through which General Synod has chosen to confer such a title in the specific case of the Primate, and in an efficient manner which avoids the need for repeated canons for successive Primates. The introduction of six-year terms for Primates in 2007 is also an argument in favour of permanent provision in the Constitution, given the increased frequency of Primatial elections.

14. On 20 October 2009, the Synod passed the *General Synod Legislation Repeal and Exclusion Ordinance 2009*. The report that accompanied this ordinance outlined the current Diocesan policy towards legislation of the General Synod, which recommends adoption or assent based on the perceived usefulness or helpfulness of the proposed legislation to this Diocese. In the case of the Canon, legislation which may previously have been regarded as of little or no use due to its theoretical nature, has now become potentially helpful and even beneficial. This answers the final 1990 argument against assent, that there was 'no fundamental reason the Primate should also be an Archbishop'. This may have been the case in 1990, but changing circumstances support the argument that there are now reasons why it would be useful for the Primate to have the title 'Archbishop'.

For and on behalf of the Standing Committee

BRIONY BOUNDS
Diocesan Secretary

4 May 2026