

Record of Service – Rev Dean Davidson

Call and Training:

In 1982 I responded to a perceived call to ministry which I had tested for a number of years. At this time I was a Flight Lieutenant in the RAAF, and I applied as a candidate for Ministry through our local Uniting Church in Canberra. Sue and I attended a candidate's camp at Retreat House in Belair, and following acceptance I resigned from the RAAF and we moved to Parkin Wesley College in Wayville at the start of 1983.

I had a positive and unusual experience towards the end of my time at PWC of filling in as a part-time minister at Happy Valley UC when Rev Anna Grant-Henderson moved to PWC as a lecturer.

My ordination was at the end of 1987.

Ministry Experiences

Parishes:

We moved to our first parish at Loxton in Jan 1988. It was a vibrant congregation which experienced considerable growth while we were there. As a first Parish it was a very positive experience, and we made some life-long friends. During that time I established "LoxCare": a community support organisation which brought together all the local churches, the Loxton Council, local Doctors, Police, Government Aid agencies and community organisations. Today it is a growing service with a large presence in the centre of Loxton. LoxCare now serves the southern Riverland area, employs a full-time coordinator and is supported by over 200 volunteers.

I was a member of the Synod Standing Committee during this time, and the Chair of the Synod Children Youth and Young Adults committee. This was an interesting experience as I had to tread a fine line to support CYYA and their full-time worker Craig Bailey during a crisis regarding the Church's attitude toward homosexuality after the then-secretary "came out"...

From Loxton we moved to the Morialta UC, commencing in Jan 1992. The first year was a shared ministry with Rev Elwin Penna: a positive and growing time. I then spent the next couple of years as the only Minister in the Parish after Elwin retired, until Rev Nairn Kerr arrived. One of the positive initiatives I started at the Magill Church was a family service which was a pre-cursor to the "Messy Church" movement, and which attracted a large and growing number of young families, including a number who had come from outside the church. My colleague did not share this vision though, and it was abandoned after I left the Parish to take up a placement as Chaplain at Westminster School in 1996.

Chaplaincy:

I served as Chaplain at Westminster from 1996 to 2006. This involved providing input for weekly Staff devotions and School Assemblies, 3 Senior School and 2 Junior School services each week, weekly Sunday Boarders' Chapel services and a yearly week-long "Easter Mission" for the whole school. I also taught "Religious and Values Education" (RAVE) ½ time, with classes from Reception to Year 12, ran extra-curricular sport activities (including Cricket and Debating), attended a yearly, week-long Year 9 camp in the Flinders' Ranges, and provided pastoral support for Staff, students and families.

Despite the considerable workload my time as Chaplain was especially rewarding because of the involvement with many 100's of young people with whom I was able to share the Gospel in a positive and mutual way. In fact, even since I left the School I have been involved with quite a few ex-students and their families as they requested me to conduct weddings and funerals. This has continued right up to last year. During the second half of my time at Westminster extra staff were progressively appointed to help carry the load: a part-time and later full-time Chaplain for the Junior School, a full-time School Counsellor, and additional part-time teaching staff for RAVE.

The load as Chaplain meant that my Synod involvement was reduced. I found it difficult to even get time to attend the annual Synod meetings because I had to arrange for my own replacements at the school. I did have some ongoing involvement with the Fleurieu Presbytery, both on committees and providing pastoral support for the Chair and Secretary during some especially difficult times for them.

Despite effectively preaching and sharing the Gospel with more young people than the entire Synod's young people's programmes I felt at times (and still do) that the Church's support and understanding of the role and activities of the then full-time Chaplains at the UCA schools (including PAC, Scotch, Seymour, Annesley and Westminster) was inadequate: and sometimes unhelpful. I recall regular comments from some Synod members that these schools were/are "elitist"... In my understanding this minimised and even at times denied the very real outreach possibilities of these schools.

I had no pro-active support from the wider Church until my 9th year when I received a pastoral visit from the newly appointed Chaplaincy support officer, Rev Nairn Kerr. I remember Nairn commenting that he had never before realised the role that school Chaplains played, or the amount of work involved, and the challenges involved. Sadly, Nairn became ill and passed away not long after that, and I believe the Chaplaincy support role was not continued in this way. Certainly, I never received any other pro-active support.

Post full-time ministry

Although I was approached to do so, I felt unable to take up a role in a parish after I finished at Westminster in 2006. I started my own Astronomy Education business: which involved visiting schools and libraries all over SA with my portable planetarium and telescopes. During the next 16 years I educated approximately 250,000 people (mainly school children) through my planetarium, and I ran night-sky viewing sessions for over 20,000 people. I was also the President of the Astronomical Society of SA (ASSA), and I am an Honorary Life Member for service to the ASSA.

I sought to explore my call and re-connect with the life of the Church a number of times during this period. I worked for ~1/2 year as a relief Minister at Ascot Park UC, and 1½ years at Woodville UC:

and I was invited several times to consider serving again as a Parish Minister in a full-time role. However, my heart, my faith and my sense of call simply didn't mesh with this. I also applied for several roles where I felt I had something to offer the wider Church: but these didn't eventuate for a variety of reasons.

I retire with mixed feelings. My career route has had difficult as well as beautiful times and I have had the support of a wonderful wife and children. I have learned and experienced a lot that I wouldn't have done if (for instance) I had developed my career in the RAAF, or followed my Civil Engineering qualifications in other directions. I have interacted positively with literally hundreds of thousands of (mainly young) people. I have a strongly introverted personality, and I have been pushed well beyond my comfort zone throughout my multiple careers, so I have grown unexpectedly in many ways.

Thoughts for the Future: “We” not “Me”...

As I retire, I grieve for a world that is being degraded by human ego and greed- and although these unhealthy attributes have always existed it seems that we are reaching tipping points in so many areas including species and habitat destruction.

I believe there is a need for ethics and politics that promote an attitude of “we”: inclusion rather than exclusion, listening rather than fighting, giving and loving rather than taking and using; restoration, conservation, protection and renewal rather than destruction and greed. We need to live “with” rather than exercise domination (or “dominion”) over; and share rather than wanting more at the expense of others and our environment. All of which is I believe fundamental to Christianity, and to the world that Jesus promoted and envisaged.

Our world needs engaged, loving, giving and forgiving people with a strong “we” ethic: we don't need authoritarianism or rigid fundamentalist religious approaches, greedy capitalism, egoism, judgementalism, tribalism and conflict. We need what I would call “true” Christianity that can talk to all people, enlightening and building a strong and lasting foundation for our human worldview.

Reflecting on my engineering past has provided me with a real-life parable for this:

In 1979 I was supervising the construction of a road bridge on Cape York, and on a visit I noted the crew pouring concrete for a foundation into a flowing stream. This caused the cement to be washed out of the concrete mix (a mix I had carefully designed for extra strength in a frequently flooded environment). Consequently the foundation would be simply a mix of sand and small stones- and the bridge would have been in danger of being destroyed by the first flood that hit it. Fortunately I was able to stop this dangerous process and a new batch of concrete was mixed and laid correctly into still water. The bridge has survived many floods since then...

My next steps in my life journey will involve exploring and promoting these themes. Over the last few years I have taken practical steps along that road by becoming a volunteer Park Ranger, working with the establishment of a “Repair Cafe” dedicated to repairing and re-using rather than creating extra waste, and supporting local re-wilding and re-vegetation schemes. I also financially support organisations such as Greenpeace, WWF, the Australian Conservation Foundation and World Vision.

I think what I need to do now is to develop a more rigorous intellectual and theological understanding and approach to support these practical steps: one that can withstand wider secular and religious scrutiny and promote the “we” world view that I believe is needed.

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