

Record of Service – Rev Dr Sean Mark Gilbert

Sean grew up at time when social obligations for church attendance were waning in Australia. In his household, Sunday School was seen as an additional grounding in public morality and therefore of some use until ‘graduation’, after which time permission was given to make up his own mind about any further church involvements. Not surprisingly, he chose to follow his father’s example by taking his leave from all things religious on Sunday morning and night!

A couple of years later, while on summer vacation and with little or nothing to do, he picked up his stepmother’s small leather-bound bible – one that had been given to her by the legendary Arthur Jackson (another story) – and began reading Matthew. Remarkably for a boy of 14, he both knew and intuited that when he read the well-known words of Jesus’, “And if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well, and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile,” that they were true intrinsically, such was their resonating impact upon him. This experience didn’t change anything greatly, but it certainly sowed a significant seed or two for an unfolding future.

It’s an embarrassing tale of youthful hubris, but when emerging from a doomsday cult experience in his late teens (another story), Sean began attending a very small rural church where the lay pastor didn’t always set the best example of preaching, to the point that Sean felt he could do better! Fortuitously, that set him on the path of some rudimentary theological education, initially with a correspondence course via Moore College in Sydney, and then by enrolling at the Bible College of SA in 1982 where, after two years, he graduated with a diploma in guitar and table tennis playing (well, that is how it seems some 40 years later).

During that time, a respected lecturer at BCSA commented that Sean’s written work and general demeanor showed pastoral promise, and had he considered taking the necessary steps towards ordained ministry through the Uniting Church? No, he hadn’t but the possibility did ring true. Consequently, Sean candidated through the then Mount Lofty Presbytery and was well guided by the Rev David Houston who seemed to have more belief in Sean’s calling than he himself had at the time.

Parkin Wesley College was a brave new world in comparison to the certainties of BCSA, and it took over eighteen months to move beyond the unfortunate, yet well-meant admonition of the Bible College’s principal to Sean upon leaving, to, “not let them change you.” Two subjects really impacted him: D’Arcy Woods’ Sacraments and an Eschatology unit taught at Francis Xavier by a feisty Dominican nun visiting from the US. Each in their own non-coercive way forced Sean to challenge his own (and his corresponding tribe’s) assumptions by exposure to thought and experience far deeper and more extensive than his own.

Sean was ordained as a Minister of the Word at the Scotch College chapel in December of 1987. Following the service, the Mount Lofty Presbytery then entrusted Sean into the care of the Coorong Presbytery, given that his first Parish of Karoonda was at its northern bounds. He well remembers speaking to a gathering of friends later that evening about the experience of breaking the consecrated

bread, then serving it to those who came forward to receive it. “It occurred to me in those moments that in fact my calling in life is to be a breaker of bread. Plain and simple, and in whatever context of service to Christ I find myself in.”

As indicated, Sean’s initial ministry placement of five and a half years was with the Karoonda Uniting Parish. As an exit student he broke the record length of stay by six months, learning a great deal about life and Christian ministry within a small farming community. At points along the way, he captained the Karoonda cricket team and was a member of the 2nd XVIII football side which won four premierships in a row. In one memorable match against Wynarka he kicked 11.1 goals. In another against United, he kicked 1.11!

The Rev Dr Charles Biggs had impressed upon Sean the value of continually learning, so not convinced he had given everything to his college studies, Sean and family moved to Boston, Mass. mid 1993, returning two years later with a Masters (Hons) degree in historical theology, more specifically a thesis on the Holy Trinity and its needed retrieval as a renewing doctrine so far as liturgy and faith in the UCA were concerned.

Early in his stay in the US, a call was received from the Goodwood Uniting Parish, with a focus on the Christ Church, Wayville community. Sean’s induction in June 1995 began a sixteen-and-a-half-year placement, one that was rich with revisioning and innovation at both a worship and missional level of expression. The Effective Living Centre (ELC) was commissioned in 1998 as the outreach arm of Christ Church. One of Sean’s most treasured memories is of the Artist in Residence program of ELC, wherein the Sunday worship space was transformed into an artist’s studio during the week, and into which many church and non-church community members would venture tentatively, only to be changed greatly by the creative and affirming experience.

Following 22 years of congregational ministry, Sean became a member of the teaching faculty at Uniting College in 2012, specifically around ministry practice. This placement was a vocation-long held desire due to his love of researching and teaching. Over the course of 13 years, Sean’s role and titles changed regularly, as did his academic qualifications grow. In 2020 he was awarded a PhD from Flinders University, along with a Vice-Chancellor’s medal for thesis writing excellence. That thesis, *Spiritual Affections and the Pastoral Disposition*, was in many ways a distillation of all he had ‘learned on the job’ and much of what he gleaned from the many writers and lecturers that he was enlarged and enriched by.

It was Sean’s privilege to conclude at Uniting College, thus retire, at the end of 2025 as acting principal. It represented a conclusion of genuine vocational purpose and meaning never envisaged at the journey’s stumbling outset. And for that he will be forever grateful.

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