

Synod '24



Record of Service – Rev Cliff Birch

I was raised as a child in the western suburbs of Adelaide, and in my teenage years I lived in the north-eastern suburbs. I experienced the influence of Christ upon my life through the compassion and courage of Christian people serving as Sunday School teachers, Religious Instruction teachers and leaders within the YMCA movement. As a young adult, I sought the help of ministers and members of the local and wider Church to discern what my vocation should be. After a few years of reflection, I offered myself as a candidate for ordained ministry from the Windsor Gardens Methodist Church in 1974. I trained for six years at Parkin-Wesley College.

The Adelaide North-West Presbytery arranged my ordination at Pilgrim Uniting Church on 17th December 1980; and by the grace of God, I have had the opportunity to serve church and community in different places in South Australia – Mt Gambier (1981-1984); Adelaide East [Beulah Park] (1985-1989); Ascot [St Mary's] (1990-1996); Lefevre [Semaphore] (1997-2001); and Royal Park United (2009-2024). In addition, I have served in supply ministries at Greenacres and Queen Elizabeth Hospital; and have offered my services as a preacher over the long term in the congregations of Alberton, Greenacres, Klemzig, Port Adelaide, Western Link, Whyalla and Windsor Gardens.

In each of these settings there came the privilege of supporting congregations in their life of worship and service to their relational communities. I remain grateful for those shared experiences which have developed the understanding of life and faith. Within the course of each placement there have come particular opportunities to serve God in both church and community:

- **Lifeline South-East SA:**

As Chair of Inaugural Board I learned what it means to work in partnership with other churches, government agencies and community organisations, to bring about a community service which sits within a Christian movement – in this case, the provision of telephone counselling for those who are anxious or troubled.

- **Chair of Synod Mission Committee:**

I participated with others in supporting and promoting the work of Uniting World, Frontier Services and the Uniting Aboriginal Congress SA. In particular, I served on what was then the Assembly World Mission Committee and learned how Christian service gains authenticity when it seeks to work in partnership with others. In 1987 I took part in a cultural exchange programme with Church of North India; and represented the UCA Assembly at the United Church of Christ in the Philippines in 1990. These experiences reshaped my understanding of Christian discipleship and heightened my sensitivity in relation to recognising and affirming cultural differences in the Australian context.

These experiences would later give shape to my interest in ecumenical and multi-faith relationships.

- **School Councils:**

Serving on the governing councils of local primary and secondary schools allowed me to work ecumenically in support of School Option Seminars and School Chaplains. During my time at Ascot Parish, I became involved in the Education Department's Marion Road Corridor Project. This availed the opportunity to help local churches understand that the changing demographics of society impacted a range of institutions and services, and that the need to respond and adapt to such circumstances wasn't a challenge that was the Church's alone. This experience gave rise to a Fleurieu Presbytery Project to consult with several congregations in the South-West suburbs on questions related to future planning. Both projects resulted in a restructure; and in the case of the Uniting Church led to the creation of the Ascot Community Church.

- **Cross-cultural Ministry:**

Given the trend toward part-time placements, I took up additional work as a Curriculum Support Officer in the Education Department. Thebarton Senior College provided an encounter with diverse refugee communities, and I participated in the 'pastoral work' of supporting Christian groups on campus and the effort to affirm multi-faith relationships within the school community. I was asked to take part (as a Minister of the Word) in a thanksgiving service held at the school for a member of staff who had died – this leadership was shared with Buddhist monks and members of the Muslim community.

My encounter with refugee/migrant faith communities led to an intention to become 'bi-cultural'. I became literate in Bahasa Indonesia. This was a help with assisting Ambonese refugees who came to be associated with the Port Adelaide congregation. The work of translating the Scriptures between first and second languages allowed me to arrange services of worship that were culturally inclusive and made other pastoral occasions more meaningful.

- **Supporting Lay Ministry:**

At Port Adelaide I shared in the work of a Lay Ministry Team – which sought to organise the life and worship of the congregation without the support of an approved placement. For many years I have offered a 'home church' experience for members of the congregation. It is an ongoing pleasure to be associated with a group of Christians who are intentional about looking for ways to be church differently.

- **UCA Agencies:**

For a decade or so, I served as minute secretary for UnitingCare Wesley-Bowden and became involved in some of its related agencies. Here I learned the importance of good governance and observed a significant cultural shift from a 'hand-out' to a 'hand up' approach in the delivery of social welfare services.

- **Roman Catholic and Uniting Church Dialogue Group:**

During the last ten years I have come to deeply value the sensitive approach given to the sharing of stories concerned with the pastoral and missional dimensions of the Church by way of interdenominational dialogue. The task of producing the study booklet "Crying Out" reflected

what the dialogue process is all about: coming to a common and respectful understanding by way of sharing insights drawn from respective traditions. The Roman Catholic community offers a range of resources that augment our own and help inform the way of thinking that is necessary for the whole Church to respond to the paradigm shifts of our time. For example, the papal encyclical, 'Fratelli Tutti' invites all Christian churches to work in partnership with others for the sake of the common good.

I am grateful for the mutual blessings experienced with colleagues, mentors and pastoral supervisors; but most all, I am most thankful for the wisdom and counsel of my wife, Helen, and our children.

In the attempt to keep faith with God's calling and the people and communities I have worked with, I have sought to act with integrity and humility while choosing to remain alongside others in the midst of those internal and external changes which have impacted the life of church and society.

Over the last fifty years, the landscape of church and community neither looks nor feels the same anymore. In the attempt to try to make some sense of my life's work within that greater story, I have wondered whether any sense of achievement (or, for that matter, any sense of failure) have any bearing at all. Life is a gift, and acts of ministry are the offering of that same gift. Perhaps the point of recalling one's life experience is to remind oneself of the ongoing call to live in the presence of God and to continue to sing those refrains which declare that the Lord is ever with us and is ever faithful.

When in heaven we behold you,
with the angels face to face,
we will see that all we've been through
was the trailer of your grace. *(Kim Frabricius).*

Rev Cliff Birch

15 August 2024



The Uniting Church in Australia
Synod of South Australia