

Synod '24



Record of Service – Rev Michael Dowling

The life trajectory that brought me to ministry within the Uniting Church is, well, strange! I was born to Irish parents and so was raised Catholic (you really don't get a choice in the matter!). However, my childhood faith didn't "stick" and, in my early twenties, I went absent without leave from the Christian faith, becoming for ten or more years a couldn't-care-less agnostic. During this time, I studied science at university and worked initially as an analytical chemist, before moving into the field of scientific instrumentation sales, service and technical support. Also, during this period, I married and had two beautiful sons, but my marriage did not last, with my wife and I separating.

Some months after the split, I had a life-changing spiritual experience, one that profoundly altered the trajectory of my life, from both an internal and external perspective. As a result, I embarked on a quest to discover or perhaps to rediscover this "God" that I had rejected many years earlier. My quest took me on many highways and byways, through an exploration of many religious faiths and belief systems. Finally, I was led, full of surprise and wonder, back into the Christian faith, only now within the Uniting Church.

At the beginning of this extraordinary period of exploration I met and married my darling Joy. Together, we formed a blended family, with my two little boys and Joy's three older children, one of whom had already left home. Joy and I also started our own business, acting as the South Australian sales, service and technical support representatives for a number of scientific instrument firms, including Hewlett Packard. It was a wonderful, challenging, intellectually stimulating twelve years of working together. During that same period, our involvement with the Uniting Church continued to increase until, one day, I received a proverbial 'tap on the shoulder' about ordained ministry. "Who? Me? No way!" Hmmm... as it turned out, "Yes way!"

On my very non-linear journey into ministry, I discovered within myself a passion to make sense of this life that we live! I developed an insatiable curiosity about the intersection between: our lived human experience; the workings of the natural world of which we humans form an integral part; the ever-changing scientific understanding of the same; and our understanding of and faith in the God who loves us.

Since Joy and I were a couple who never did anything by halves, not only did I commence a full-time Bachelor of Ministry degree, but Joy also simultaneously started a double degree in Social Work and Social Planning! It was brilliant, and we both loved it! Sadly, and before the completion of her studies, Joy suffered an acute health crisis in 2009 and, although she survived, she would be on oxygen 24/7 for the rest of her life, and with a greatly diminished capacity. Together, we began to come to terms

with the new, ever-changing reality that would mark the remaining ten years of our life together. I am forever grateful for the love and support we received from Uniting College at that time. I completed my ministry degree and commenced aged care chaplaincy with Eldercare, something which I continued for six years, and which I loved. During this time, as well as being Joy's husband, I was also her carer, assisting her with those things she could no longer do. Joy exhibited tremendous courage and resilience during these ten years, making sure she did everything she was still capable of doing, including having fun!

At the beginning of 2018, I left my chaplaincy work, in order to be home full-time with Joy. That decision was just so right. Joy continued to decline during the year, but my being at home gave us the time and the space to reconnect at a very deep level. The last year we spent together was just the best! My darling Joy died on 16th November 2018, surrounded by those she loved.

In early 2019, as the quality of my grief at Joy's loss continued its ever-changing course, I felt a feeling rise within me about a return to ministry. It was my immense good fortune to be appointed minister at Blackwood Uniting Church, commencing in April that year. My gratitude is twofold: not only did I meet and marry my darling wife, Karen, but I also realised that I had come to a place possessed of the ethos that it was more important to wrestle with the questions than to cling to the illusory idea that we have all the answers. It has been there, for the past five years until my recent retirement, that it was my privilege, in many contexts, to engage in and lead theological reflection on our lived experience as human beings. I was very aware, during my time at Blackwood, that I had come to a special place. For so long it has had a deep commitment to making a difference to its community and to the wider world. It has not the slightest inclination toward an inward-focused mindset, nor of a fear-driven desire about "getting more bums on seats." Instead, what drives this special place is a calling beyond itself, a calling to contribute to the world, a calling to connect with the world "out there." The members have a passion for working with like-minded individuals and groups in order to create a better community and a better world, thereby expressing the love of Jesus in their actions. I continue to be inspired and moved to tears by the extraordinary compassion and commitment of so many individuals in that place.

As I look back on my relatively short, late-in-life period of ministry within the Uniting Church, I am incredibly grateful. My time as a chaplain in aged care was pivotal to the remainder of my ministry, in congregational placement at Blackwood UC. As a chaplain, I had the privilege of being allowed into the lives, and of journeying with precious individuals. At Blackwood UC, this focus on sharing time and space with others continued, with the building of meaningful relationships. As I think back on "highlights" of my ministry, I imagine there may have been some sermons in which I didn't bore people witless, and there may have been studies I led that people found engaging to some degree. But, for me, the most significant moments were not these, but instead the moments of deep human connection, of encountering people in our mutual vulnerability and human frailty, those moments of standing with others on holy ground. Some of those special moments came when preparing for and leading funerals of those I had come to know and, in many cases, to love.

There are too many individuals to thank for the generosity I have received during my ministry, but one person must be specially thanked: my professional supervisor, mentor and friend, Rev Dr Leslie Underwood. Ever since first meeting Les during a Clinical Pastoral Education unit that he led, I have been struck by his wisdom, his grace, his courage, and his generosity of spirit. I visited Les, on so many occasions, when I was in turmoil: feeling anxiety or despair or anger or confusion. And after every visit, when I left his office, I was always different, sometimes transformed in ways sublime and beyond my understanding. Thank you, Les, for everything.

As I commence my retirement from ministry, as I look back with gratitude and forward with joy and hope, I acknowledge that I am, quite simply, the luckiest of men.

Rev Michael Dowling

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