

Stories of being part of the Uniting Church

Pitt Street Uniting Church, 21 June, 2020

Contemporary Reflections by Rev Gareth Thomas-Burchell,
Annette Allerding and Suzanne Leal

Pentecost 4A, UCA Anniversary

Romans 6: 1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

This reflection can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

GARETH

I was born in Uganda. It was and remains a country of ecumenical and religious diversity, and there appears to be a happy coexistence, where there is mutual respect for all expressions. At least, that was my memory.

So, having being born into an ecumenical and interfaith existence, I have never had any difficulties with denominational or interfaith relationship and communication. I recall that in my young years in Uganda, there was not a large array of choice for places of worship. Our family attended the one church which was the All Saints Anglican Church in Kampala. However, I remember well the Mosques and Hindu Temples that abounded in Uganda, and so had a natural curiosity of all other religions. I grew up with the necessity of religious cooperation and dialogue, a condition of which I have no problem.

We did, for a short time, attend another Church of another denomination that had a fundamental biblical literal leadership. I recall the judgemental comment made by our Sunday School teacher who said what a terrible thing it was that Hindus deified all living things. I recall her saying, in her deep-south American accent, "*They worship elephants you know!*" My sister and I questioned this judgement, and we were told that our questioning was wrong. Upon telling our father of this conversation, we left that church and were happy never to return.

My father was a Welsh Baptist who had an entrenched understanding of progressive theology, and his Christian expression was with a well-grounded attitude of keeping a close relationship between faith and praxis. He encouraged discussion and questions. He was a great influence for all of us.

Upon our arrival in Canberra, Australia, our family were quickly on the hunt for a church to attend. The year was 1964, and we found a church that had been "planted" that was based at the local primary school. The minister was enterprising and was assigned to set-up a new concept of denominational cooperation, and so the combined denominations of a Presbyterian and Methodist church was born.

As an impressionable teenager who cared not for the nuances of denominational difference, the joining of this church was no drama for me. Belief in God and being a follower of Jesus Christ was the essence, and denominational doctrine was of no importance in the life of this young teenage boy.

That is the way it was, as my faith developed, with its doubts and surges over the next few years. After a conversion experience and so seeing greater relevance of faith and lifestyle expression when I was about 23 years old, I became more involved in the taking up of church roles and responsibilities. This was still under the combined banner of both Presbyterian and Methodist expressions. I became confirmed as a Methodist because we were able to choose between taking up either the Presbyterian or Methodist vows for our confirmation vows. That was in 1976. It was the following year that the Uniting Church in Australia was formed.

This was the culmination of many decades of discussion and negotiation between the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational Churches in Australia. A constitution was drawn up, together with The Basis of Union. It was an exciting time of formation. Most members of the three denominations joined the newly formed Uniting Church in Australia, but some decided to remain as continuing in that other denomination.

At our church of Saint Margarets in north Canberra, I remember well the fanfare of celebrations with the release of helium filled red, black and white balloons and the obvious excitement of the congregation. As a 27 year old with strong memories of denomination and religious diversity, I thought that this day was a step in the right direction. However, my excitement was not as great as most others, due to my already well-honed ecumenical DNA. However, I am very proud to be a member of the Uniting Church in Australia, and one of its ordained ministers. The UCA has offered me the freedom to express the same progressiveness that I was born into all those years ago in Uganda.

~~~~~

## **ANNETTE**

Good morning everybody - and it's wonderful to be here.

The Uniting Church means a lot to me, and in particular Pitt Street Uniting. I love the warmth and the friendliness and the strong sense of inclusion and involvement which I've experienced from the first day I attended there three or four years ago.

When growing up we lived opposite a Congregational Church. My father was a choir master, my mother the organist, so it was the big thing every week, every Sunday. And Sunday school was a big event with lots of children. For me that was a joyous routine and connection time. There was also the congregational youth fellowship meaning an awful lot - there's my badge! We used to organize our own social life. That was the interesting experience in itself.

But I'd come from a difficult background and a stressful life and an abusive marriage. Yes I am a survivor of domestic violence and I took a long while because I could not speak out. I eventually was able to speak out. The abuse in the marriage was of complex proportion and too involved and unnecessary to outline here. But at no stage did I feel I was supported by any church that I happened to attend. And all the while I was coping with my children growing up and moving house, sometimes and then interstate.

So I was attending churches at different locations. But there was actually no one to turn to or to talk to. The bigger events in life, like abuse or homosexuality or whatever was happening at the time. In fact one of the churches abandoned me when it realized I was getting divorced. So I wasn't helped at all at that point - you know it was my family.

So, before joining Pitt Street Uniting I was in a regular attendance at yet another local church. Music was a highlight and friends were formed. However I spoke little about my family. After all I was divorced and some of my beautiful much loved and cherished family members are gay.

Then came the same-sex marriage debate - and I started to find my voice. We were all asked to attend a special meeting in the parish room with all the priests, our staff and the parishioners. The hall was packed out and we were directed by our newly appointed and very young rector to vote No.

This was alarm bells for me and we received a couple of hours of instructions of how to live our lives using the Bible as a reference. The time was right for me, I realized I needed to stand up, even though everybody else was sitting down. I stood up while everybody stared aghast that I dare to interrupt - and I said I was really uncomfortable with what was being said. And I actually couldn't really follow what they were saying - that I was no longer able to attend this church!

A couple of days later the rector and I shared a coffee, hoping to sort of sort things out. But really, I was just issued with some more rules and certainly told that that being a Christian doesn't mean you support homosexuality, so I was not being a Christian. He said that the Bible - you need to follow what the Bible is saying.

So I actually said I love my Bible, but I'll not be staying in this church. My faith and my Christian beliefs follow a compassionate line of inclusiveness as our Lord Jesus taught us. To live and care for each other and to have no divisions. So there are no divisions between races, skin colour, wealth or sexual identity. All humans need to live in love and respect equally. As we say Pitt Street Uniting:

*Wherever you are in your faith journey, wherever you have come from, wherever you are going, whatever you believe, whatever you do not believe, you are welcome here.*

So I've come around from starting in a Congregational Church that was very active, I can assure you, to the Pitt Street Uniting - where I feel comfortable and at home here.

So thank you to all - and thank you to Pitt Street Uniting.

~~~~~

SUZANNE

My father was born into the Presbyterian Church, and it was at a Presbyterian Church camp - a PFA Camp - that he met my mother. As a family, we remained Presbyterians until the union, when we quickly jumped ship from our non-uniting local church.

I grew up as a half-hearted member of my local church in Wollongong before moving to Sydney for University where I stumbled upon Glebe Uniting Church, and the inspirational minister, Anne Ryan, who reassured me that as a Christian I could be critical and enquiring and that there could be humour and wit and intelligence in a faith that could also carry me through my working week.

For the past 15 years, I have been a member of Pitt St Uniting Church, where from the beginning, I was welcomed by its eclectic, clever, searching, empathetic and generous congregation. The worship and sermons have continued to keep me interested and challenged and I am surrounded by people of action, who live their faith.

Pitt St is notorious as a church of radical action and radical acceptance and in my time here, I have understood that to be a Christian is to be not self-satisfied or complacent but rather, to be on a search for justice and fairness, to be part of a belief that was revolutionary in its beginnings and remains so in its essence.

Over the years, the Uniting Church has wrapped itself around me and my family. Each of my four children has been baptised in the Uniting Church. I was married in Pitt St Uniting Church. Just under three years ago, my father's funeral was held there.

In particular, it is through the prism of my father's life that I have seen the beauty of the Uniting Church in general and my church, Pitt St, in particular. When just out of school my father, Barry Leal, had given thought to becoming a minister. Instead, he became a French academic, culminating in his appointment as Vice-Chancellor at the University of Southern Queensland. In his spare time, he obtained a Bachelor of Divinity and a doctorate from the Uniting Church's tertiary educational facility, the United Theological College. A forerunner of the study of Eco theology – the theology of the environment - he showed me that our stewardship of the environment is a manifestation of faith, in as much as our care for each other is also a practical application of the teachings of Christ.

Highly regarded for his scholarship, my father gave sermons on his studies, taught courses and published books on eco-theology, and remained vocal about the need to care for our environment.

He was embraced by the Uniting Church as a scholar and as a man of faith. And, later, after his health failed and he became more and more immobilised by Parkinson's disease - which made speech and movement difficult - he continued to be embraced by the congregation of Pitt St Uniting Church. It was an acceptance and a love that I so appreciated, all my family appreciated, for it is not everywhere that the infirm are both accepted and respected.

For me, the Uniting Church has been a haven and a support, particularly during times that have not been easy for me. I know that this has not been the experience of everyone who has been involved with the Uniting Church and I am sad about that. I hope that amends can continue to be made for those the Uniting Church has not protected and who have suffered as a result.

I hope too that the Uniting Church will continue to speak for justice and fairness and love and faith in a changing world and that the example given by Christ will be one we can continue to follow within the umbrella of the church itself.

Happy birthday, Uniting Church!