

## **Reflection on 20 years of Ordination**

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church October 11<sup>th</sup>, 2020)

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### Introduction

Twenty years ago, I stood at the great big pulpit of the Collins Street Church and made promises to the denomination just before I took my Ordination Vows. I thought I might look back and see what I said to the denomination that year about my ordination, to see if the sentiments still held true and reflect on what others have taught me about ministry in those twenty years.

So, first back to the statement I made to the Assembly in May 2000 just prior to them voting on whether they should ordain me or not.

### Statement to the Baptist Union of Victoria re. my Ordination, - 17<sup>th</sup> May 2020

In January 1990 my best friend died. This event was the catalyst that I believe God used to bring me here today. This event sent me on a search – a search for the meaning of life generally and the purpose of mine in particular.

I had grown up in an Anglican Church and most recently had been a member at the Rosanna Baptist Church for a few years when this happened. I am grateful to both church communities as they showed me Jesus as the one who embraced and accepted all, no matter what their station in life, much like my friend had been.

In 1991 my search, with the encouragement of Rev Jim Barr led me to enrol in a Bachelor of Theology at Whitley College. As I studied part-time I continued to work in Crime Statistics for the Department of Justice. I was however becoming frustrated in my work, mostly because I yearned to make a difference in the lives of those whose names and numbers were on my desk.

Nearing the end of my studies (or so I thought) I sat in the library with a couple of colleagues. They were on at me again about entering the ordained ministry. I got up and went in search of peace and ended up in the Professor of Systematic Theology's office. He challenged me about what I was going to do with my life – more study? I indicated to him that that wasn't 'hands on' enough for me and that more study had to have a purpose, had to somehow make a difference in the church. He asked if I had considered the ordained ministry – was there no escape? I followed the advice of Dr Rees and did not tell anyone my conclusion for two weeks and conducted a survey of friends and acquaintances.

The following year I explored my suitability for ordained ministry with a group of committed people from Collins Street Baptist Church. I applied to candidate and waited to see what doors might open.

In 1997 I accepted a call to Moreland Baptist Church, a small but loving community who have taught me much about ministry. They have taught me that ministry is about caring for all in our community, that it is about sharing God's love with those both within and beyond the church walls. They have taught me that it is great privilege to share in the joys and sorrows of those we are called to care for. They have taught me that age, ethnicity and gender are relatively unimportant when it comes to ministering to others, rather it is the use of your God-given talents that is important. They have taught me that preaching is important, it is the opportunity to explore the ways in which our stories interconnect

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with God's story. They have allowed me the great privilege of watching their children grow in faith.

God has used many people and experiences to convince me that my calling is to the ordained ministry and I thank both God and each of those people. I also promise to continue to use my gifts to share the word, to show compassion for all.

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Five months later this is what I said to the 500-600 people at Collins Street on my ordination day, I knew some of the people, most I didn't.

### Ordination Statement at Collins Street Baptist Church – 8<sup>th</sup> October 2000

Many events, opportunities and people have led this girl from Geelong to stand before you at this moment in this place. All of these events and people have been used by God to bring me here today and I am very grateful to our God for all of them.

I have found that it is very difficult to ignore the call of God. The call of God, that deep river, waited and waited and would not go away until I listened with my heart. That call, I believe is to serve Christ by serving others in word and deed with all that I have and all that I am. In order, that they might know they too are made in the image of God and called to live in abundant life and love with God.

God has placed me in communities and given me opportunities, which have helped form and nurture that call. My parents, who didn't always agree with my choices, but supported me nonetheless. The Anglican Communion initially nurtured me in the faith. The Rosanna church along with Rev James Barr encouraged me to study and also showed me how to proclaim the love of Jesus creatively. The Collins Street church, which helped me discern my call to pastoral ministry and gave me opportunities to test that call. Whitley College and in particular Frank Rees, who allowed me to explore my questions, challenged me to use all I'd learnt in God's service and then encouraged me. The Moreland church which embraced me with open arms and gave me the opportunity of serving my 'apprenticeship' with Rev Colin Hunter. This community but particularly, the children have shown me how to love and accept all with the same love and compassion that Jesus is.

Finally, I could not stand here today if it were not for the example of many courageous and faithful women who followed the call of God in their lives and hence paved the way for other women. I think particularly of the five barley loaves who with great courage left South Australia to serve in India. Of Rev Marita Munro, the first female ordained Baptist minister in both Victoria and Australia, who has taught me that the gift we bring to ministry, is ourselves. For all of these I am grateful.

So here I stand, not knowing exactly what the future holds but looking forward to the privilege and responsibility of serving God by serving others, especially the little people with my heart, my head and my hands within the Baptist Union of Victoria and beyond.

### So, what have I learnt?

Over the last twenty years I have had the privilege to work with a number of groups of people that have taught me much, I just want to share with you what they have taught me.

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- Young Offenders – taught me that you needed to love people enough to set boundaries for them, people either live up or down to the labels they receive. They also confirmed for me that God is a God of second chances, a God of forgiveness.
- Children – taught me that they can communicate great truths about God if we let them. They also reminded me that they need to feel like they belong to the church community because they have many insights to offer us.
- Older People – taught me about resilience, about how to be faithful through turbulent times. They also often have shown me how to minister to them as they have prepared to die. What wisdom they have if we only listen to them.
- Asylum Seekers – this group of people taught me about hospitality and helped me see that I had allowed a sanitised version of the Gospel to creep into my understandings. They taught me how to find joy even in the midst of persecution and sorrow and that family is not necessarily related to blood-lines.
- Homeless – this group most recently have taught me that a little bit of care for others opens up so much as they begin to trust you with their stories and their truth

I hope that I have served the 'little people' and God with my heart, head and hands. I hope I have served with compassion. I hope I have stood up for others, stood up for justice. I hope I have preached the gospel as much if not more in my doing than in my speaking. I hope I have been creative in the way I have served. I hope I have followed the example of many women and have opened the way a little bit for others.

I do know that I have received so much more than I have given. I have learnt so much more than I have taught. I have been ministered to as much as I have ministered.

The journey with God and others has been an extraordinary privilege and I can't even imagine what God has in store for us all next.