

Wednesday of this past week brought to a close the *Week of Prayer for Reconciliation*. Last Sunday parishes were encouraged to pray for reconciliation and to incorporate references to the week of prayer into their worship. A welcome to country was suggested.

As I understand it: one of the things indigenous people often do when they greet one another is to rehearse where they have come from as a way of stating who they are. I have been appointed as the locum priest of the parish of Ipswich until the end of the year so I thought that I might begin by telling you a little of who I am and where I come from.

My non-practicing Methodist father was one of seven children. He was raised on a large residential block in the Brisbane suburb of Graceville. My non practicing Anglican mother was one of six children raised in the outer

Brisbane suburb of Wacol. Both my parents were descendants of second or third generation European settlers.

As a girl; mother attended worship at St Alban's Anglican Church at Goodna. In those days St Alban's was serviced by clergy from St Paul's Ipswich. My parents were married by one of the clergy from St Paul's Ipswich in St Matthew's Anglican Church at Sherwood in Brisbane.

When I began to explore Christianity in my late teens it was in the Anglican Church where I had been confirmed that I continue my search. It was through my involvement at St David's Chelmer that I met and later married my wife.

We have two children; our daughter, her husband and their two children, together with one of my son-in-law's two adult children live in Melbourne.

Our son, his wife and their four children live in England.

I trained at St Francis' Theological College in Milton and have served in the parishes of Bundaberg, St Luke's Toowoomba, Mundubbera-Eidsvold, North Rockhampton and Milton. I have ministered as the hospital chaplain in Rockhampton and at what is now The Park Centre for Mental Health at Goodna. I also coordinated hospital chaplaincy for the Diocese of Brisbane for ten years.

Since I retired in 2007 I have served as the locum priest in a number of parishes including Moggill Mount Crosby, North Ipswich, St George, Camp Hill, Warwick and Strathpine as well as helping out on Sundays in a variety places.

So what do I bring to St Paul's Ipswich? I am the younger of two sons who grew up in a working

class home in suburban Brisbane. I left school after Junior to take up an apprenticeship in the building industry.

I worked on the tools for eleven years. Ten years of which as an employee; the remainder as a self-employed contractor. I studied at night to gain matriculation before training for the priesthood. While in Rockhampton I completed a Bachelor of Arts Degree majoring on the social sciences.

Growing up with parents who were scarred by the great depression, I know what it is to be careful with money and to get by with very little. I know what it is to do physical work. I have some understanding of the complexities of family life and a great love for the Anglican Church and what it has to offer.

I am aware of the dysfunction of family units and many of society's institutions (including dare I say

it the Anglican Church) that impact on the wellbeing of many individuals. And I know from personal experience how life threatening illnesses can expose our vulnerabilities and make us fearful for ourselves and those closest to us.

As the locum priest the Diocesan draft protocol states that I am responsible for “the good order of the parish.” I am to “facilitate the transition to a new incumbency”, “attend to the ongoing needs of ministry at all levels” and “ensure that the parish council meets regularly and effectively”.

It suggests that the “vacancy period is an opportunity to help the church to remain stable and productive.” And that the Locum’s role is to help the church lessen its anxiety and improve its health.

It goes on to suggest that part of the locum’s role is to lighten the incoming pastor’s load by inviting

the church to work on important issues during the vacancy period.

It says that the vacancy period should not be seen as a “steady as she goes” time, or “holding the fort”, an unproductive, fallow time. Significant change is possible, but should develop in consultation with the Regional Bishop and Archdeacon.

The protocol suggests that during a vacancy it is vital to make time for putting the service of the former incumbents into perspective. A time of letting go, and discarding old expectations, wounds, patterns and baggage of the past.

The protocol concludes that it is only when the congregation has let go of the former incumbent that it can fully accept a new pastor.

The protocol says that every congregation today must be conscious of developing new leadership

for the tasks of ministry and for incorporating younger and newer members into its body.

It says that an interregnum is a prime time for reviewing the membership, its needs and ways of organising, and for making decisions on how best to use its resources.

It says that it is also an opportunity to rethink theological issues and diocesan linkages. Congregations, it says, learn to see the church and issues through the eyes of former pastors. It is important for congregations to reassess attitudes, and its relationship with the rest of the Diocese.

The protocol also states that an interregnum is an opportunity to clarifying the congregation's identity. What distinguishes St Paul's for example from other churches in Ipswich?

It is also an ideal time to conduct membership and neighbourhood studies to find out how effectively the church is reaching and serving its own

community. Only then the protocol suggests will the congregation be ready to find a priest who will be a good match for it.

So we have much work to do together. In short my role is to help you discover your role as the people of God in this place and to encourage you to fulfil your vocation.

I will attempt to do that by sharing with you my understanding of what God is saying to you and to me through the scriptures and by listening, as carefully as I am able, to how I believe God's Holy Spirit is being manifested in your individual and collective lives.

In this morning's New Testament reading for example the disciples were encouraged to "not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day."

In the gospel reading we have Jesus saying that “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

There is much in the world for us to grieve about; undoubtedly there is much about the church that causes each of us to despair. But for all its shortcomings there is much about the Anglican Church that continues to inspire and encourage me.

I look forward to learning how you are being renewed day by day. And trust that together we might discover how we can do the will of God in this place.

I have shared with you some of the influences that have helped to fashion me into the person I am. I have also shared my understanding of what it is that I as the locum and you as the people of God are expected to do during this period in which you are without a parish priest.

We have also briefly touched on the scriptures for this morning in which we are encouraged to “not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day” and Jesus saying that “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Owen Strong
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