

Don Whebell ... a brief history in his own words

I was born at a very early age in Melbourne in 1937, with the name Donald Graham Franz. Four years later, my father, Arthur Franz - a carpenter - was killed in a building accident. Two years later, Mum remarried, to a soldier who was in Melbourne on discharge from the army and working for the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation building bombers for the RAAF. His name was Bill Whebell - hence my new name.

A couple of years later, my brother Barry arrived, and Dad decided that we would move to where his family lived in Herberton, North Queensland.

On a cold, wet, sleety, blustery Melbourne day in 1944, we left Melbourne and headed north, with Dad assuring us that he was taking us away from all this rotten Melbourne weather stuff and going to 'sunny Queensland.' We arrived by train in Herberton in 1944. We seemed to have brought Melbourne's weather with us: it was a rotten, cold, wet, sleety, blustery Herberton day.

Dad took to building houses on the Atherton Tablelands and we moved around a lot. By the time I was 11, we had moved from Herberton to Yungaburra, to Atherton, to Mareeba, to Tolga, to Ravenshoe, to Pinalba, to Brisbane, to Sandgate, to Shorncliffe to Redcliffe. I did one year of High School at Industrial High in Brisbane.

Life was good. So was church. My brother Barry and I became involved in the Redcliffe and Sandgate Presbyterian Churches. At Sandgate, I graduated to the exalted position of President of the PFA.

We had a really great minister at Sandgate. Great in personal relationships with us young people. Deadly dull in the pulpit. One Sunday night, he preached this gloomy sermon on "Being full of the joy of the Lord."

I remember thinking that if I had that subject and did to it what he did, I'd give it away. That was a beginning: God sort of

said to me, "Well, if that's how you feel, how about hearing me call you to the ministry and brighten things up a bit?"

Hector – the minister – encouraged me to start studying. So the study began. English, Philosophy, Greek and Hebrew for starters. It was a hard slog for someone who, only a few months before, was a fitter and turner and had a stint on aircraft engines in the RAAF's National Service scheme: "Menzies' Emus," they were called – one in a million got to fly!

As a student minister, I was appointed to Bundaberg, to be Assistant to Stan – the minister, who was also Moderator. He was a really good mentor.

I well remember my first couple of weeks there. Stan was in hospital so I was on a steep learning curve. A funeral and three weddings in my first two days. I'd never even been to either in my life! Stan told me, "It's all in the Book of Common Order – you can't go wrong." He was right – up to the point where, confronted by a bride and groom, I looked down at the book and saw ... the *funeral* service!

My first Monday morning was a howler: Religious Education in the assembly hall at Bundy High packed with 164 high school kids. Stan again reassured me: "Here are the RE books published by the Church of Scotland. They're good stuff. Can't go wrong with them."

Yeah ... well!

Down near the front was this disruptive group trying with some success to get to me. One boy in particular. Fixing him with my blue-eyed glassy stare, I yelled: "You! Out!" And out he went, heading for the Principal's office. I actually felt pretty bad to hear that he got caned.

Later in the day, I called on Stan's wife at the manse to check if she needed anything done. Her two kids came in and she introduced us. I hadn't met Bev. I sure had met her son – at RE! No wonder 164 kids had gone very quiet earlier that day

when I yelled at David: if I could send my boss's son to the office, what chance did *they* have?

The son of the manse kind of took well to me – something to do with my not breathing a word about that morning to his Mum and Dad.

After Bundy, and spectacularly failing subjects, I took a year out of studies to get my head in place and worked with Dad building houses. That was good and I managed to get through that year's studies by correspondence education. I also picked up a few skills in woodworking.

Then off to Cairns as assistant to Les Mackay, Fred's brother.

The move to Cairns brought Pam and me together. A new church building was erected in Earlville and Pam was appointed superintendent of its Sunday School. Shy by nature, she avoided any chance of being introduced to me. But that evening, at the youth group, I was introduced to the members by Les. "Have you now met everyone? Les asked me. "All except the pianist," I replied. Very quickly – almost abruptly – she shot back: "Pam Bell". The beginning of a beautiful relationship!

Skip forward a few months, and we had been seeing each other regularly. Not keen on being a pillion rider on Pam's Vespa, I gave her a lift to and from church on Sundays. Saying good night one evening, I said to her, "I like you a lot, Pam." To which came her never-to-be-forgotten reply, "I like you a lot too, Mr Whebell" We sealed it with a kiss.

After two years in Cairns, I went to Mackay for 12 months. Study was still tough going, but I was making progress and starting to pass more subjects than I failed.

My supervisor was Rev. Bill Walker, who was inducted into St Paul's church the day I arrived in Mackay. I could not have asked for anyone better to supervise my development as a

minister. He even enrolled in the university course I was doing, to offer encouragement, which I needed very much after a disastrous experience of a supervisor in Cairns.

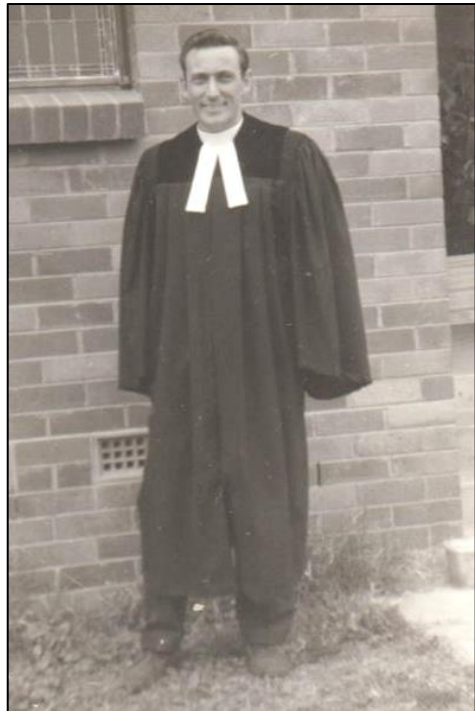
The year 1964 arrived and so did another appointment: South Maroochy – Mooloolaba, Maroochydore and Buderim.

On 21st March that year, Pam and I were married in St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Cairns. In the first year at South Maroochy, I completed my entrance requirements for the Theological Hall and did the first year at Emmanuel College, going down for three days each week, which was rather tough so early in our marriage!

But good old Mother Church made up for that. The next two years as a student minister were at Auchenflower – a rich experience that we still treasure.

With studies over, we went to Charleville in 1968 and I was ordained there (*photo*). My area of responsibility covered Quilpie, Windorah, Wyandra, Augathella and Morven – pretty much a combination of Town and Patrol ministry.

A bout of ill-health prompted a move. The church's Department of Christian Education offered me a position in Townsville as its Northern Christian Education Officer. That



began a great experience of teacher training, youth development and youth camps – especially the Camp Quest Adventure Camp, held each Christmas period in the Cooloolo National Park. That program offered experience to young people from all areas of society.

A further dimension of my Christian Education work was to conduct seminars for congregations preparing for the coming of the Uniting Church.

Church Union came in 1977. After a long and sometimes awkward process beginning in 1901, the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches amalgamated with the name *Uniting Church in Australia*. And on a cold, windy, wet night at Milton Tennis Courts in Brisbane, the celebration of the union for the Queensland churches happened.

My role in the new Department of Christian Education was to lead programs and resources for youth groups and elders in the new church. One legacy from that was writing a *Workbook for Elders*, which still gets some use.

After 18 months of that, it was time to move on. A call came from St Stephen's, Toowoomba, and we moved there in 1979 – three kids, lots of books and our first Citroen.

The six years in Toowoomba were pretty enjoyable, with a large congregation and a great Council of Elders who knew what pastoral care was about. There were two ministers in the St Stephen's team – Ken Hill and me. Rev. Aubrey Baker was minister at Wesley over the road.

Along with the parish responsibilities, there were some additional bits to stop me from getting bored: chaplain to the Southern Downs University, chaplain to Oakey Army Aviation Base and chairperson of the Presbytery of The Downs.

After five years - when we were still settling in - we went for a holiday to Bribie Island. During a beach walk, we came

across two friends: Rev. Duncan and Jean Harrison. Over a couple of ice-creams, Duncan mentioned in passing that the Central Queensland Presbytery was on the look-out for a new Presbytery Minister. Just a comment-in-passing.

A phone call from Rev. David Fanning a week or so later started with this question: "I'm ringing to ask if you will come up here to be our pastor to the Presbytery. Pray about it. We will!"

We did. And we went up there in 1985. Toowoomba people could not understand: "Why would you want to go *there*? You'll boil in summer." To which there was one reply: "But we won't freeze or be fog-bound in winter!"

The nine years in Rocky were just great, although in the manner of a Presbytery Minister's work, not always easy. Being minister to ministers is a wonderful and enriching privilege, but there are times when it can be hellishly demanding, especially in situations where ministers get themselves into strife and want someone to blame - like me.

At my induction, there was a moment when a member of the Mackay congregation presented me with a bishop's mitre, saying: "In your role among us, you will be our bishop: caring for the flock, teaching us about the journey we share, encouraging us to work closely with other churches, and enriching our gifts for ministry."

Those were the important things they expected. My response to that was: "I have only two expectations of you ministers:

1. Faithfully preach the gospel, and
2. Passionately love your people.

Do both of these to the best of your gifts and calling, and all will be well."

I still go with all that - the function of bishop in the Presbytery and the two expectations we must have for our ministers.

The Presbytery of Central Queensland spread across a vast area, from Proserpine to Tannum Sands-Gladstone and west to Boulia. So there was plenty of travel, and far too much time away from Pam and the girls.

Between Townsville and Rockhampton, my Christian Education work included leadership of the Department's *Camp Quest* program - taking a team of leaders and 40-60 teenagers into the Cooloola National Park for two weeks of adventure camping. The main focus was on building trust between people, learning about living in the bush and becoming leaders. It was 16 years of high activity, and many of those campers are now leaders in community and Church.

During my time in Central Queensland, I was elected Moderator of the Queensland Synod. That was under the old system of the Moderator serving a one-year term. Not a good idea. Three years later, I was elected the first of the full-time Moderators. That term was a much better idea, as it gave time to develop relationships among the Presbyteries and also with the leaders of the other denominations in our working towards more active ecumenical relationships among the churches.

At the end of that term, I was called to the Mary-Burnett Presbytery as their Presbytery Minister. That went for three years, when health and stress issues got the better of me.

So I retired. We continued to live in Caboolture and Pam continued in her role as Administrator of Queensland Churches Together, the state-wide ecumenical body.

We moved to Brisbane for a period of 11 happy years at Jamboree Heights, and then to Beaudesert to be nearer to our family members living there and in Rathdowney.

My retirement activities have been with wood work, being Co-Secretary of the national Roman Catholic-Uniting Church Dialogue, Secretary of the Synod's Ecumenical and Interfaith

Committees, and my huge interest and enthusiasm, teaching the *Basis of Union* at Trinity Theological College.

As I write this, I am working on developing a website which will contain documents and resources that relate to the *Basis of Union*. As I am one of the few survivors of the group of people in leadership at the time of the inauguration of the Uniting Church, I am hoping that the website will keep alive much of the history behind the formation of this church. So much of the documentation of that period is a treasure that needs to be kept alive to encourage the future life of the Uniting Church.

For the first five years after arriving in Beaudesert in 2012, I participated in a men's shed, teaching wood turning. Illness forced me to conclude that activity. But another activity has continued to enrich my life - offering professional supervision to ministers. Thus, something of my experience and enthusiasm will be offered to others.

I look back over all those years, with deep gratitude to God, to the many people who have been part of the journey, and especially to you, Pam, for your patience, care and encouragement without which I could never have made it!

And ... thanks be to God!

Grace and peace,

Don

17th November 2018

A footnote by Pam

What an incredible journey we have shared over nearly 57 years! My darling, you have left behind such a rich legacy of what you have meant to so many people.

Not least your family - myself, and our daughters Judy, Ruth and Melissa, are all going to miss your presence so much, as are the partners of Ruth [Martin] and Melissa [Jimmy].

So too your four grandchildren - Bec, Laura, Nikki and Dean, and their partners Shelton, James, Alex and Sharni.

The gift of great-grandchildren is one that we have been very privileged to share - Bec and Shelton's Claire, Imogen and Ruby; Laura and James' three children, Amber, Ethan and Megan.

The bonds we have all shared will always remain with and within each of us.

Rest in peace, Don, Dad, Paw, Donski, Grandad, Great-Grandad.

Well done, good and faithful servant. As you enter into your eternal rest, grace and peace go with you.



Pam

December 2020

