

## Service to Mark the Conclusion of Rev Swee Ann Koh's Ministry at Manningham Uniting Church and his Retirement on Sunday, June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2024 @ 2.30 pm

A Reflection: **My Story. My Testimony. My Account.**

### Prologue

First things first, thank you for coming to my Cutting of Ties and Retirement Service.

When I announced to the congregation that I am retiring on 30<sup>th</sup> June 2024, I said:

*"Whether it's good news or bad news depends on you."* Some of you might want to see me out of here by the end of this service. I officially finished my ministry with Manningham Uniting Church today, but you will still see me now and then because I need to pack up and clean up. Don't try to boot me out too quickly. I appeal to your generosity and kindness.

My heart is deeply warm to see my son, Ming En and his partner, Sarina and my nephew Justyn and his partner, Cherry here this afternoon. And of course, my beloved colleagues, past and present. And a special joy to see Megan and Emma, my former partners in crime. I miss you both. My friends in and outside the church, a few members from previous congregations I have served and my placement in the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

Thank you for your support and friendships over the years. Thank you for coming to share my stories of the joys and pains in ministry. Thank you for coming and celebrating my retirement.

### Introduction

I can't remember the exact date, but I arrived in Melbourne, Australia in January 1983 from Singapore to embark on my Theological Study at Ridley College, an Anglican College.

As preparation for my trip to Australia, I watched the movie, *The Man from Snowy River*, A movie that was filmed in Victoria in 1982. I remember I was so excited.

When I commenced my Theological training in 1983, I was connected to the Gospel Hall Melbourne Church<sup>1</sup> which meets at Wesley Uniting Church in Lonsdale Street. That's where my journey with the Uniting Church in Australia began.

**Over Thirty Years Later** Today, Sunday, 30<sup>th</sup> June 2024 I retired as a Minister of the Word of the Uniting Church in Australia. I was ordained at Wesley Uniting Church, Melbourne on Friday, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1991. ***That spans 12,220 days or 33 years, 5 months and 15 days.***

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ucghm.org.au/history>

But who's counting? It might not be a record but it's long enough for me. I served in four congregations: Mt Martha Uniting Church, North Essendon Uniting Church, St Andrew Uniting Church, Fairfield and Manningham Uniting Church, Templestowe. I also served on the Commission of Mission as the Director of the Intercultural Unit and after a major restructure of the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, as the Intercultural Community Development Advocate with eLM.

I have lived in Australia longer than I have lived in Singapore. And yet after all these years I still can't call myself an Aussie because I don't eat vegemite and don't have a football team that I barrack for. I remain a staunch atheist.

After serving God and God's people through the Uniting Church in Australia for 12,220 days I would like to give a short reflection under the heading: **My Story. My Testimony. My Account.** The writer of Romans tells us, *"Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God."* (Romans 14:12) I stand here before you to do just that!

### **My Journey**

I journeyed from Singapore to Melbourne in 1983 sensing God's call to ministry and later that call was confirmed by the Uniting Church in Australia. As I retire today, after 33 years, 5 months and 15 days I still sense the deep call of God on my life.

Despite the pains and stresses of ministry, the racism I have experienced both in the church and the wider community, the cost of speaking truth to power, my refusal to collude with the systems and powers that oppressed, humanised and discriminated. I am glad that I can stand before you and declare that the call I heard in Singapore, confirmed by the Uniting Church in Australia has not been dimmed or extinguished.

### **Six Lessons**

Today I want to share six lessons that I have learned in Ministry over the last thirty-three years. I am sure there are more than six. These lessons are personal. I am not sharing them as a template for ministry. I am simply giving an account of my journey. I have chosen Mark 1:1-6 to anchor my reflection. I promise I will be succinct – one minute for each year. How many years did I say that I have served?

Don't worry. You know I am a person of few words.

### **My Lesson One: Don't Take It Personally.**

Six months into my first placement, an elder (a white retired man) after a morning service said to me, *"I'm embarrassed that you are my minister."* After uttering those words, he

walked out of the vestry. He never explained why he was embarrassed. I was shocked, to say the least. I didn't know how to respond. I remember going back to the manse and remained silent for a long time. His words silenced me. His words cut deep into my being. I felt humiliated and shamed.

Thank God I didn't fall apart. But I didn't follow him up either. I didn't ask him to explain what he meant. Truth be told I didn't have the skills then. Today my response would have been different. I work very hard not to take anything personally in ministry. But it's hard when you are told: ***"I am embarrassed you are my minister."***

As a non-white person, I often get criticisms about my accent, my mispronunciations of certain words, and my level of competency in the English language. If I take it personally, I know my tendency is to become defensive and unable to hear the criticism. I have learned to pause, take a few deep breaths, reflect and respond if necessary.

Do you know what? Most of the time I discovered it's not about me anyway. In the ministry, one experiences many projections. People who have not reconciled with their shadows, their unresolved trauma, their unhealed wounds often project their dark side onto others.

### **Lesson Two: Speak Truth to Power**

John the Baptist was a prophet. I am not a prophet. John spoke truth to power. He has inspired me to exercise my ministry in prophetic ways – speaking truth to powers. John got into trouble and lost his life because he spoke truth to power by meddling in the life of King Herod and his family. The Herods were the political establishment of the day, and John did not temper his words when dealing with them. For me, there is a refreshing integrity about John. He was always the same no matter where he was, and no matter who the people were around him. He didn't play games. He stayed constant.

But when you speak truth to power there is always a cost. Speaking truth to power cost John his life. But you and I know, this was nothing new. When a prophet speaks truth to power, the powerful often strike back. When a prophet speaks truth to power, the prophet can expect pushback. Over the years I have learned the call to ministry is not a call to be popular, or to be nice all the time. If you want to be liked, if you want to co-exist with the Empire then it's better to keep quiet. Don't rock the boat. Don't challenge the systems that oppress, dehumanise and discriminate.

Over the years I have learned that when I don't speak truth to power, it means that I am colluding with the powers that oppressed. And I refuse to. I have discovered that when you seek to exercise your ministry in a prophetic way, you will invite trouble.

Sometimes I don't mind getting into trouble, necessary trouble or good trouble as articulated by the late John Lewis, an American politician, civil rights activist, and a committed Christian

### **Lesson Three: It's Not About Me**

Before Jesus appears on the scene, we are introduced to John the Baptist. And we are told that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness. (Mark 1:4, Matt. 3:3b & John 4:3a).

Matthew and John tell us that: "John's clothes were made of camel's hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey." (Matthew 3:4 & John 1:6) Not my style of clothing or my kind of food.

John is clear, his role is to prepare the way for the one who comes after him.

*In Mark, we are told: as it is written in Isaiah the Prophet: "I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way" <sup>3</sup> "A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.'*

John the Baptist wasn't living in the wilderness to boost his social media profile.

He was the real deal, a true outlier. He knew his life purpose. His mission. His Ministry. He was not the Messiah. He was not the way. He was not the kingpin. He was to smooth the way. He was to pave the way. In short, his job was to prepare the way for Jesus. I think in many ways our ministry is about paving the way for Jesus.

That's how I have sought to exercise my ministry for the last 33 years, 5 months and 15 days. To pave the way, to smooth the way for those who come after me. Especially when I was working for the Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, I was hoping to smoothen the way for those CALD ministers and pastors who came after me.

### **Lesson Four: Uncomfortable Conversations**

Sometimes I think the church is like an Elephant Sanctuary. What do I mean?

There are so many elephants in the room (in the church), but we seldom like to talk about them. Why do we avoid talking about the elephants in the room? We don't like to offend.

We don't like tension. We don't like to rock the boat. We don't like conflict. We want everyone to be happy. Over the years in ministry, I have learned that it's better to learn to be comfortable with uncomfortable conversations.

According to bestselling author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek:

*“As human beings, we have to work very hard to be human, and one of those human skills that we need to practice is how to have uncomfortable conversations. Being uncomfortable is part of being human.”*

I have learned in the long run, avoiding an uncomfortable situation just perpetuates the discomfort or breaks relationships. So often when people avoid uncomfortable conversations they triangulate. Instead of approaching the person concerned and have a difficult conversation, they speak to another person and they triangulate him or her.

What’s wrong with direct, face-to-face conversations? The courageous way is to lean into the tension and have that uncomfortable conversation. Don’t triangulate others.

### **Lesson Five: Power and Control**

I like to talk about an elephant in the church room – Power and Control.

We all have power and we all like to control. I know we ministers have what is called ‘positional’ power. When I arrived, my dear colleague Moses told me that “Ministers of the Uniting Church have lots of power.” I told him yes and no. Yes, we Ministers have positional power. But over 33 years in the ministry I have seen members exercising their powers and making life difficult for ministers in placement.

It’s never a one-way street. And yet often we don’t want to talk about the elephant in the room. So often in the church, we have allowed people to appropriate power that they shouldn’t have. Which can lead to nepotism. Which can lead to manipulation. Jobs for the boys or girls. And often protecting those from their same tribe.

We must not be afraid to talk about the elephant in the room. Not afraid to have that difficult conversation on the misuse of power and the need for some to control.

When we don’t call out the misuse of power, we are colluding. And that has long-term negative consequences on the life of the congregation.

Often, I asked, ‘Whose voices are preferenced?’ ‘Whose voices are silent?’

### **Lesson Six: Be Who You Are**

Church members have all kinds of expectations of their ministers.

If you happened to follow a much-like Minister, often you would hear statements like: *“The last minister did this and that.”* Or *“Rev so and so allowed us to do this and that.”* When that happened, I had to remind some of them that their favourite minister was no longer

around. I am here now, speak to me. "I am sure so-and-so was a great minister but he or she is no longer with us." You and I know it's impossible to live up to all the expectations of members. Be yourself. Accept who you are. I don't want to be somebody else. That's not a statement of arrogance. A former member of a congregation once said, "*What you see in Swee Ann is what you get.*" That doesn't mean that I can't change. I have changed and I will continue to change. I have changed in so many ways over the last 41 years in Australia.

I am imperfect. I am a wounded person seeking to heal my wounds. I have made wrong decisions and will continue to do so. But I hope I have learned from them. I will continue to speak with an accent some people will find difficult. I will continue to mispronounce certain words. I will continue to make joyful noises instead of singing. I am prepared to be vulnerable, to express and own my feelings. When I am angry, you will know that I am angry. When I am sad, you will know I am sad. When I am happy, you will know I am happy. I find such freedom in being myself.

Let me end here before I am seen to be too negative.

Over the years when I have shared that I have found inspiration from John the Baptist's life for ministry, they reminded me that John was beheaded. So, if I think I have the gift of martyrdom, I need to be careful because I can only use it once. I am glad that I stand before you with my head still intact.

Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your support, your prayers, your friendship, your wisdom, your care and love. I wouldn't have survived without your support. I have learned much from you. I am closing a chapter and beginning another.

A dear friend of mine, made me a card with these words: "*There are three parts in any life story, the beginning, the middle and the part yet to be written.*" From tomorrow onwards I will begin to write that part that is yet to be written!

AMEN.