

## **Simon Gomersall remembering Neil's leadership at Toowong Uniting Church**

Hi Libby,

Mat Smith kindly shared this email address with me. I hope that is OK.

I'm writing to express to you and your extended family Selena's and my sincere sympathies following Neil's recent passing. Unfortunately, we will be away on Saturday, when the funeral takes place, but your family will be in our thoughts and prayers on that occasion.

I know that Neil meant much to many people and I expect the extent of his influence will continue to emerge for many years to come, simply because his unassuming, others-centred, servant-hearted nature made him one of those subversive kingdom-agents who make no fuss about themselves, but end up abundantly sowing seeds of hope and life into the lives of so many others.

I wanted to take a minute, though, to share with you my perception of the vital role he played in the revitalisation of Toowong Uniting Church in the late 2000s. When I arrived at TUC, Neil was chairing the church council, even though he was well into his 80s. He, along with others, had been faithfully stewarding the church's resources for many decades. The Church Council had been constantly exploring options in an attempt to meaningfully reach out to the community beyond the congregation. Neil was a razor-sharp Church Council chair. He kept meetings to time without dominating the proceedings and brought an encyclopaedic knowledge of UCA regulations, which was never overtly displayed, but sat like a safety net beneath the many innovations and experiments we attempted. He was incredibly supportive of all the church's efforts to undertake sustainable missional initiatives, even though not all were fruitful.

And he led from the front. When we started a prayer meeting, Neil was a deeply committed participant. Any courses we ran were always attended by Neil. Along with Beth and numerous others, he was always on the lookout for new people to greet and was a generous financial supporter of any initiative we undertook. He frequently asked clarifying questions after hearing a sermon or sought further reading when he encountered ideas that were unfamiliar to him. Neil was theologically liberal in the very best sense. He listened carefully to the opinions of others and was genuinely open to embrace new ideas when he perceived their integrity. He beautifully balanced a cool head and a warm heart. Many were blessed by both his rigorous intellect and his deep faith and

conviction. The degree to which he was a student of life was an edifying example and an inspiration to many of us.

But one thing stands out as exemplifying his leadership. As the church began to transition from more traditional styles of music and liturgy to more contemporary expressions, even though Neil personally preferred the more traditional styles, he wholeheartedly supported the changes. This included asking me for YouTube links to new songs, so that he could familiarise himself with them prior to Sunday worship. He also regularly encouraged the older members of the congregation to accept the changes for the sake of the church's larger mission. As we introduced worship teams, he even volunteered to participate as a worship leader, standing and singing amongst groups of much younger musicians. This became a beautiful and important symbol of both the integration of generations in the church and our commitment to change whatever was necessary to reach people beyond the existing congregation, a commitment made possible largely through Neil's example and leadership, drawing on the enormous social capital he had built through decades of kind, generous and faithful service.

There are so many other tributes I could share, but perhaps in summary I can simply reflect that I remain profoundly thankful that as I served as Pastor at Toowong Uniting, Neil's godly influence made a critical difference to the degree to which the congregation was willing to embrace change, allowing the church to grow from a small group of elderly people to a thriving multi-generational community. I'm also personally grateful to Neil for sketching a picture of the remarkable contribution that someone in their later years can make to a church. I'm praying that when I reach a similar season of life, I could serve with similar humble fruitfulness.

Please know that you are all in our thoughts and prayers at this time. Selena and I join you in remembering Neil with profound gratitude and mourning his loss with genuine sadness.

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Warmest regards,

Simon Gomersall