

## Rome to Wittenberg

Last Updated Saturday, 06 June 2009

Three of our own members who converted from Roman Catholicism talk about the journey and the differences.

### From Rome to Wittenberg

Why are so many Roman Catholic laypeople becoming Lutherans?

Sunday 20 July 2008 was a great day for me. It was cold, even for winter, and I was up early as usual, wrangling children into 'nice' clothes and cleaning Weet-Bix off faces. I was especially excited because it was the day when a big change was happening in my life. I had decided to formally leave my tribe and be accepted by another&thinsp;&mdash;&thinsp;it was the day I was to join the Lutheran church.

The terminology Pastor Andrew used was "becoming a member", but for me, it was a conversion, plain and simple. That's because there are vast differences between being Catholic and being Lutheran&thinsp;&mdash;&thinsp;big, significant, deal-busting reasons to line up on one side or the other. Sorry to sound so divisive, but there you are. There really is no way around it&thinsp;&mdash;&thinsp;if there were, Luther himself would have found it 500 years ago.

So why did I change? And why have several other St Paul's members also made the change, especially when some Lutheran pastors have gone the other way and journeyed to Rome?

I met with Graeme and Margaret O'Keefe to flesh out some reasons.

How long have you been members at St Paul's?

Graeme: About three years.

When did you decide that you didn't want to be Catholic anymore?

Graeme: When we were at uni we belonged to a great church&thinsp;&mdash;&thinsp;St Carthage in Carlton. The priest was really switched on and there was an intellectual vibe. We were married and living at St Mary's college and were close to the Loreto nuns who ran it, and it was really stimulating.

Margaret: When we finished studying, we moved to Eltham and started a family. We went to have our first child baptised and found the local Catholic Church disengaged and uninviting. The only contact we had initially was a bill for the

baptism! There was no sense of community, no involvement, and I felt isolated, especially being a new mum in need of a support network.

What led you to look for a new community?

Margaret: Three things happened. One day our eldest came home from State School and started talking about the Bible stories he'd learned in CRE, and was on fire about it! I started learning stuff about the Bible I hadn't known before. Then a girl at work said that she had recently travelled to Europe and felt impoverished because so much of western culture is based on religion and she hadn't a clue. The final straw was a neighbour who tried to enlist me to complain to the school about not having obtained parental permission to put the kids in CRE, and I felt, 'Actually, no! My son is really getting something from this and maybe we all should do something as a family.'

Graeme: I knew about St Paul's via a scouting connection so we came along.

What distinguishes Lutheranism from Catholicism for you?

Graeme: Definitely talking about the Bible. You never heard anything about it, growing up Catholic.

Margaret: I went to Catholic schools for 12 years, did all the sacraments and yet had no idea of the New and Old Testaments. I was learning the stories for the first time with my son in CRE.

Same here!

Margaret: The Bible was never talked about or explained when we were growing up, and there was no scope for individuals to wrestle with ideas and concepts.

Graeme: Contrast that with the pastors at St Paul's&thinsp;&thinsp;we were visited by them, they were interested in our belief systems&thinsp;&thinsp;...

Margaret: The pastors work hard to give you a message, something to re-lect on and grow &thinsp;&thinsp;... and there is a desire to cater for children&thinsp;&thinsp;...

Graeme: If you don't, you'll lose them. I compare this with going back to my parents' church in Bendigo, and it's the same old same old humdrum...

What didn't you ever "get" about being a Catholic?

Margaret: The Pope — I never got infallibility; and the lack of roles for women was a turn-off. Add contraception, the attitude to gay people — they are part of the fabric of our community, you can't just ignore them...

Graeme: Unmarried clergy and infallibility: they just don't make sense. St Paul's functions like the early church — decisions are made with prayer and discussion, not just by an authority figure and handed down to be implemented. That sort of 'authority' is a corrupting influence and can actually work against the interests of the people.

What didn't you realise about Catholic beliefs until you left?

Graeme: I have a Protestant perspective on Mary now — I was educated by Marist brothers, and Mary was considered higher than Jesus!

Margaret: Catholic guilt — I remember a child at school who was singled out because his parents were divorcing and he was made to feel like he was the guilty one. I also dislike the fact that you couldn't question stuff; you just had to accept everything.

You mentioned Bible knowledge before?

Margaret: I feel like I have islands of knowledge that are disconnected and I want to be able to connect them...

Graeme: The Old Testament was basically taught as Jewish history and had no connection with the way we were taught the New Testament, yet the New Testament is riddled with references to the Old Testament.

Yes, the Old Testament is a wasteland to me — I still don't get it, because the focus was all on the New Testament, which was taught so uncritically, without any context or frame of reference...

Graeme: I think the next generation will struggle to understand the pastoral metaphors in scripture — who has any contact with farms and shepherds these days?

Did you have an "a-ha!" moment where you realised that the Lutheran tradition is the right one for you?

Graeme: I don't think I ever will, because it's a continuous process of learning for me.

Margaret: I'm starting to understand a sense of logic, a significance of the stories — maybe this is an adult perspective now? My "a-ha" was realising that life is a journey — often a hard one — and that we need community to be accepted and to belong. I feel that at St Paul's.

I have to ask this — when you were Catholic, how did you think you would be saved?

Graeme: You had to sacrifice to be saved. You had a set of sins that had to be atoned for before you could be saved. You had to earn it.

Margaret: I don't think I thought about it — I just went through the motions, I hung in because I had to.

That was actually my "a-ha" moment — when I understood that salvation came through faith and that faith is not an act of will, it's a gift from God. So do you understand now about justification?

Graeme: Definitely! I believe it now — that we are saved by faith in Jesus and don't have to earn it through merit. That's what Luther was about — the individual relationship with God and good works flow from that. With Catholicism you had to earn favour with God.

Do you think the Roman Catholic and Lutheran churches will ever be reconciled?

Graeme: No. There would have to be dissolution of the enormous power base, and that won't happen.

Margaret: I can't see Lutherans accepting the Pope, celibacy — we've come too far and don't need them anymore.

Pondering this, I think that all the things Luther objected to are still there&thinsp;&mdash;&thinsp;indulgences, re-sacrificing Christ in each Eucharist, merit, saintly inter-cession ...Â... they're not disappearing from Rome anytime soon. My Baptist father-in-law came out with an in-teresting word&thinsp;&mdash;&thinsp;Mariolatry&thinsp;&mdash;&thinsp;for the Catholic attitude to Mary. I think it over-states the case a bit, but still, Mary is a major sticking point; and rightly so. Besides, what would we do about the Marist Brothers?

You can sum it up this way. Lutherans know we are justified by faith in Jesus. Faith alone saves us, sin-ful as we are. We believe our Lord is big enough to save us all on His own, and our own merit and works have nothing to do with it. Simple. But not easy.

Sunday 20 July was also a sad day. My dear friend and piano teacher Dorothy Hamilton, life-long devout Lutheran and major influence in my life, came to St Paul's to share my special day. After the service, she con-fided that today was the twentieth anniversary of her husband Keith's death.

I remember that day as if it were yesterday. Mr Hamilton was one of the most Christian men I've ever known &mdash;&thinsp;the kind of man the world scorns because he was gentle, humble, caring, and kind. I remember Dorothy telling me that Keith rose early every day to spend an hour with his Lord and the scripture he loved. I'm sure he touched more lives than just mine. And Keith was a convert from Catholicism, too.

Kathy Mildred

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