

Rev Deacon Jim Erskine

Ordained 9 September 1976

After ordination in 1976, (a first for Queensland) and in full time ministry, I was part of a team ministry in the remote mining town of Mount Isa, Queensland. At that time there were five priests, a religious sister and my wife Barbara and myself on the team. We elected one member to act as team leader and another to manage the business of the parish. One priest was a pilot and maintained responsibility for the remote communities of which there were five and he also ministered to the indigenous people in the huge parish which was larger than Tasmania. A few years before I arrived in the parish, an intense mission had been carried out over a couple of months and the city part of the parish had been divided into five areas. Each area had a lay person who was responsible for calling meetings on a regular basis. I was assigned one of these areas to act as chaplain which included preparing input for discussions, being a resource person and to facilitate any projects that the area might deem necessary for their apostolate. We had weekly team meetings and each of us was through discussion and negotiation given tasks that needed carrying out from time to time.

In the first seven years of my deaconate, I gave the homily at 2 or 3 Masses each weekend, had two or three weddings a month, was responsible for the baptisms once a month and funerals were often of children or young parents. Early in my time, I found myself struggling with the whole area of loss and grief, and as a couple we were to find training and understanding of the subject through the local funeral director. A part of this was to organize specialists in the area of Grief and soon after began running workshops for the general public on this subject at the local TAFE College. After a couple of years I was assigned to develop a new marriage education program for the parish, which meant that my wife and I were involved in monthly workshops for couples wishing to be married. Prior to my ordination, I had worked at Yarrabah a government reserve in North Queensland and a catholic mission in the Northern Territory with indigenous people. This experience was good preparation for involvement in Mount Isa at the new local indigenous kindergarten as a board member. In 1980, I was approached by the local citizen's advisory committee of the city to take on the job of marriage counselling. After consultation with the bishop and the team, I went away for training and set up the only marriage counselling service in the western region. This was under the umbrella of a non-church organization with finance from the government. This meant that I had additional income to supplement my stipend as a deacon and the town had access to qualified counselling service. Our family now had 4 children, two were born in Mount Isa to add to the two we had when I was ordained.

I took part in annual clergy in-service workshops, retreats and days of reflection. The days of reflection were organised by the team itself and drew upon visiting clergy from time to time. Towards the end of our time in Mount Isa, I was given the responsibility for the community of Mary Kathleen, one of the original uranium mines in Australia, to provide catechesis, pastoral care and to arrange with the priests for Mass to be celebrated there. I normally would accompany the priest and often gave the homily.

At the end of 1983, I was transferred to Townsville. At the same time, our bishop Len Faulkner had been appointed as co-adjutor bishop of Adelaide and when I arrived in Townsville, the administrator wasn't sure what to do with me. I was assigned to the parish in which I lived and assisted in the manner of a pastoral associate with pastoral visitation, catechesis, weddings, funerals and baptisms. A new bishop Ray Benjamin was ordained in the middle of my second year in Townsville and he gave me a temporary assignment to assist in the marriage tribunal as well as some parish work. My wife and I arranged with the local TAFE College and church organizations to provide a course on grief and loss. Barbara became a chaplain at the hospital and this involved

me in the wider community as well as the Catholic community. We assisted in the training of doctors and nurses in palliative care, as part of the training of nurses in general and ran workshops in parishes and other centres on various aspects of grief and loss including children and loss, men and grief, trauma reaction, etc.

In 1986, I was invited by the Bishop and his consultants, to go overseas to study canon law. With the looming shortage of priests, he saw that my involvement in the Tribunal would then release the priest who was in charge to return to parish ministry. In 1987, my family and I went to Canada to study at St. Paul's University in Ottawa. In May of 1989, I received my Licentiate in Canon Law and returned to Townsville where I became the secretary of the tribunal. Under this banner in 1992, the bishop asked me to be the person to manage professional standards issues within the diocese. This started a steep learning curve which had a solid foundation in my earlier studies in psychology and anthropology prior to being ordained. This was the start of 17 years of stressful ministry in an area that was very new and very sensitive in the church.

In 2000, our bishop retired and following some heart trouble, I was released from the Diocese of Townsville to become incardinated in the diocese of Sale in Victoria under Bishop Coffey. I was offered the position of Diocesan Secretary in the bishop's office and continued to act as a judge in the tribunal, professional standards officer, bishop's representative on various committees and any other position the bishop deemed would assist him in the governance of the diocese. My canon law training was helpful in this position. The unfortunate side of this assignment was that I was not involved directly in parish work and thus somewhat divorced from the sacramental life that I had enjoyed with a parish.

I retired from full time ministry in 2010 and am available for weddings, funerals and baptisms while I still exercise the role of judge in the Melbourne Regional Tribunal and the National Appeal Tribunal. I also serve on various boards and committees. In the past year, I have been a member of a steering committee to assist in the development of a spirituality centre in the diocese. Due to further heart problems, I have had to limit my availability for any stressful ministry.