

RENOVATING THE ARMADALE UNITING CHURCH

Rev Gerrit Peterschlingman

Gerrit's time at Armadale was a time of change in the Parish – and he was right in the thick of it! He recalls as follows.

Receiving the Call to the Parish was both an honour and a challenge. “Do what you like!” commented a member of Presbytery, an expression of quiet resignation at the state of the church and congregation. The ex-Presbyterian Church in Denbigh Road was already closed for worship. Presbytery in its wisdom had designated the Kooyong Road ex-Methodist Church to be the Uniting Church of Armadale.

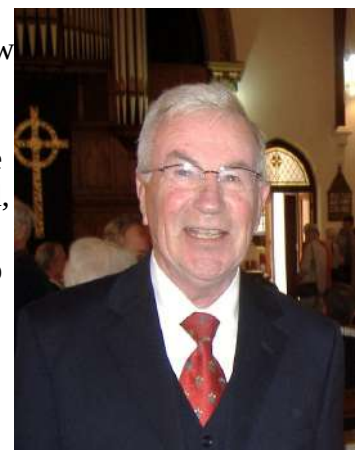
After my induction I felt a real desire to re-open the Denbigh Road Church and the Council of Elders and the Parish Council agreed. The building was in excellent condition with a magnificent pipe organ and exquisite stained glass windows.

Having re-opened the Church, it was agreed that it also be used for cultural purposes, for example for Armadale State School end of year concerts. The complex of buildings also became the home of the Carl Jung Society, The Toorak Players, and the Choreography Dance School. The Austrian Choir gave concerts and the Church was the venue for Sir David Wilcox's Workshop for choristers – after which a supper was held in the Manse. Also held there were Sunday afternoon concerts and organ recitals.

As well as worship at Denbigh Road, morning services were also held at Kooyong Road. The latter property was in disrepair and urgently needed attention. Proceeds from the sale of the second manse were used to finance a restoration. The Church and Hall buildings were connected and new toilets, kitchen, etc incorporated.

During my time at Armadale I was appointed as a probation officer for minor offenders listed to do community work. One day I went with a bow saw to cut down the side fence between the Church and the lane behind the shops. A businessman from the corner property, Shahid, asked me what I was doing. I told him I was pulling down the fence to create some parking spaces. The gentleman enquiring said “I will pay for that”. I said, “No, we will pay and you can rent the space”. That section of the yard was cleared by the offenders under my supervision and later, paved. Two largelillypilly trees, hiding the building at the front were cut down.

Just prior to moving all church worship and activities to Denbigh Road and at a choir practice at Kooyong Road, a large section of plaster in the transept collapsed, giving the choristers an enormous shock!



As parts of the buildings were cleared for reconstruction, it became clearer how depressing the Sunday School rooms were, and how derelict the toilet facilities. Spouting was rusted through, and the outside gully trap used for handwashing was Dickensian. Most inconvenient!

The architect's plans were accepted and the buildings closed. Prowling around, I found some items of historic value including an early order of service conducted by the Rev. Francis Neale in the 1800's. At the later re-opening and dedication, his great-great grandson carried the Bible into the restored Church.

Work began. The interior was virtually gutted, and then reconstructed. Elders and Councillors agreed the catholicity of the faith should be brought back and expressed in the interior. Instead of the huge pulpit in front of the organ pipes, an extended communion table made from wood from the old building was put in place so the life, death and resurrection of our Lord became the central focus. Behind the communion table, was hung a large celtic cross – embroidered in gold on a green velvet background. Two brass candlesticks on each side of the open Bible, signified the humanity and divinity of Christ. Pews were rearranged on each side of a central aisle.

Meanwhile building proceeded. Church and Hall were combined and extended under cover, a new kitchen, toilets and a shower included. The modern glassed roof construction was tastefully incorporated into the building. Another interesting point was that the Kooyong Road Hall had one old piano in poor condition. We were fortunate to obtain two new pianos, a grand piano for the Church and an upright for the Hall. After the re-opening, the buildings were in constant community use as well as worship. The gardens were re-established and open for Devonshire teas, fetes etc. The former were served to passers-by who were then invited in to hear the organ and view the new interior with its theological meaning.

Confirmation classes began again as did other church functions and meetings. Christmas Eve services were held in the traditional candlelit manner and the New Years Eve services were followed by suppers in the Manse, ensuring the lively concepts of fellowship and worship in the restored church.

All this came about with the cooperation of the Council of Elders, the Parish Council and the congregation, sharing a vision for the future. My special thanks are reserved for Mr Bruce McMullin for his excellent support and generosity of spirit during the period of restoration.

(This article originally appeared in *The Mustard Seed* issue 8, Advent 2011).