

Eulogy for Dad

30th Dec 2016

Here in this place, Rev Geoffrey Horne Underwood (known to everyone as 'Geoff') felt at home. He had a very lively family home just yards away; in the village he was known and respected; and here in this building he carried out his duties as minister of Word and Sacrament. His theological degree was a BD from Edinburgh University, but he always referred to his ministry and theology as a different BD – the 'Black and Decker' theology. It was rooted firmly in the practicalities of life with all its challenges, difficulties.....and delights. God was to be found in the realities we all face, not in some distant, imagined celestial location. This meant that prayers, sermons, pastoral visits, and everyday living was about meeting both life and death with a faith which believes goodness, generosity and compassion matter above everything else.

But, Geoffrey Underwood began his life in a very different place. He was born to Lily and Harry Underwood on 6th November 1928 in Stockport, Cheshire. As the only child, Geoff, grew up in a home where he was loved and cherished, but it was also a childhood touched by hardship. In the 1930s times were extremely hard for most working class families and this was no different in the Underwood household. There were times when food for the day was bread and butter and the fire could only be lit because a neighbour had been kind enough to bring a shovelful of coal. These are the childhood experiences which were never forgotten and shaped his commitment to being generous and open to the needs of others.

As a young man he was fully involved in the congregational church at which there was an active youth group. There was great fun to be had and friendships made in the hockey team, outdoor activities, and discussion groups. It was during this time that he met Florence Annie Redfern (known to us all as Laurie) and he knew that this energetic, feisty redhead was the one for him. Their partnership was forged on the basis of equal measures in each of them of determination, love, aspiration and imagination. But, National Service meant being apart for two and a half years whilst Geoff served in the Far East, with brief times in Malaysia and Singapore, but most of his posting spent in Japan. This was a time when he encountered the aftermath of the horrors of which human beings are capable of inflicting on one another. Many of the things he saw and experienced were too hard to explain on returning home, but once again it

confirmed in him the belief that it is far more worthwhile placing your faith in goodness than allowing the evils we see in the world to overcome us.

Having come through the Second World War as children, both Geoff and Laurie knew how to appreciate the future they could carve out together and they were married 64 years ago on 29th November 1952. Their wedding took place at 1pm; they shared a roast beef dinner at the local café and boarded a train for London at 4pm for a four day honeymoon in the capital city. They returned with 10/- left in their pocket: a fact which pleased them no end – and it was two days later that the great fog which made the history books descended on London.

Their early married life was financially challenging and Geoff worked as an accounts clerk, heading for a qualification in accounting (which delighted his mother), but their aspirations and their faith led to Geoff entering theological college to train as a congregational minister (which did not delight his mother). This meant more hardship for three years, living in one room, with Geoff required to board full-time in the college but with dispensation to come home for one night a week at the weekends and then the arrival of a baby (Jayne) in the middle of it all. Geoff called her the football player than ran onto the pitch before the game had started. That one night that Geoff and Laurie had together each week turned into a sleepless night with Geoff pacing the floor cradling the rather sickly baby whilst Laurie snatched some rest, ready for the next week. These years, along with many other experiences strengthened the commitment to the values of compassion and recognising how much it costs to watch out for one another in the relationships we have.

In time the family grew to include Mark, Brian and Stephen. With each new arrival the family increased in its breadth and richness and in the usual haphazard nature by which most families hold together, this was a group of individuals who each found the love and freedom to pursue their own path. The foundations laid in that home, grounded in who Geoff and Laurie were as a couple made it possible for the next generation to stretch their wings and explore the world knowing that there was always a 'base camp' to which they could return and be restored and refreshed.

As congregational minister in Levenshulme, Manchester, Geoff and Laurie began to look to Scotland as a possible future home and so it was that Geoff transferred into the Church of Scotland ministry in 1962. After one year of attending New College and serving as an assistant in Morningside, he took up his first and only charge as a Church of Scotland minister here at Chalmers Memorial Church, Port Seton. The only break in his time as minister here was from 1968-69 when the family went on a one year exchange to Nebraska, USA. During that year when the civil rights movement was still at its peak, Geoff was thrilled to meet and shake the hand of Robert Kennedy who stopped briefly at a small airfield in Nebraska (generally a state hostile to the civil rights movement). Today it is in honour of all those involved in the civil rights movement that you will find yourselves leaving this service to the strains of the Battle Hymn of the Republic which was played during Geoff's year in the USA at the funerals of both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy.

The best 28 years of Geoff's life were spent here in Port Seton and on his retirement he continued to be very active in the presbytery as a locum in several churches. He loved being with people and serving them as their minister. He had a natural and strong compassion for those with whom he shared the task. He always maintained that the task of a minister is first of all to love people. Believing in the best and serving with compassion was in his bones.

In retirement, Geoff and Laurie have lived in Stenton, Dunfermline and latterly Edinburgh – active but gradually slowing down. Geoff always took an avid interest in what was happening in the world and the lives of his ever-growing family. He always worked at making sure they knew he loved them and they would find a listening ear, humour, and understanding when they had time with him.

The original family with four children now includes those who have become family through marriage: Martin, Pauline, Dhana, Zac and Clare, ten grandchildren and one great granddaughter. Geoff's life was full and as someone not afraid of death it was an ending which was consistent with his living. He heard all the love which surrounded him in his closing hours – in words, song, and touch....and all that needed to be communicated by those who have lost him was made clear.

His life is to be celebrated and his goodness, generosity and compassion will be remembered, but also continued in the lives he influenced. Thanks be to God for the gift of Geoff's life. Amen.

Rev Jayne Scott