



A Life of Unlearning

a journey to find the truth

by

Anthony Venn-Brown

Revised Second Edition

Winner of the Sydney Gay & Lesbian Business Association's
Literary Award 2004

Foreword by the Hon. Michael Kirby

This is a book in which the author tells of how he 'unlearnt the truths I'd been taught about myself and discovered how to live as the real me'. It is the story of his quest to find not only self-acceptance but one of the most powerful forces in nature—human love.

For most people, their search for love follows a predictable pattern. There are ups and downs. But heterosexuals do not generally feel a need to proclaim their sexual identity as such. It is just taken for granted. Society and its institutions are built around it.

Anthony Venn-Brown grew up in a loving family and within the Anglican tradition of Christianity. At puberty he discovered his attraction to his own sex. His book is the story of his fight against these feelings; and his attempts to combat them by joining (and later ministering in) fundamentalist and Pentecostal churches, by marrying and fathering children, and denying the reality of his inner-being. In the end, he accepts who he is; rejects the centuries-old endeavours to make him feel ashamed of himself; seeks love to complete his life; and finds new paths for his spiritual journey. His is a rocky road; but it is the only one made for him.

Not long ago, nor far away, Anthony Venn-Brown would have been stoned to death or burned at the stake, imprisoned or universally shunned. However, his life coincided with changes in knowledge about sexuality. Twentieth-century science, through the work of Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud, Alfred Kinsey, Evelyn Hooker and countless others disclosed the existence of a proportion of people who, like the author, are homosexual or bisexual. Many debates continue: the precise segment of a population that identifies with that minority; whether the cause is always, or only sometimes, genetic; and which of society's rules need to adapt to the new reality. In most Western countries, under the influence of education and the new media and human rights law, great changes have occurred that have made the journey of self-acceptance easier for people like the author of this book.. Yet for most individuals it is still a painful journey, as this book reveals. It can be painful for the person at the centre of the journey; but also for that person's family and for society itself.

Despite his difficult experiences, the author emerges from this book as a lucky man. He was blessed with the love of his family and of his wife, now remarried: herself a victim of his earlier struggles. His daughters' love and that of companions who have helped him to discover himself, all taught him lessons. He shares them with us. The churches with which he was successively associated do not always seem to have fulfilled the loving message they were established to preach. The dramatic stories of attempted exorcisms and public humiliations are, in some ways, modern counterparts to the burnings with faggots in earlier times and the executions by stoning that still take place in some parts of the world.

The author is careful not to condemn people of religion. For the most part they themselves emerge from this book as victims of old traditions and past misunderstandings. Just the same, they are sometimes the cause of pain, violence and many tears. They live on the fault line that divides our world between knowledge and ignorance, rigidity and kindness. To force people to deny their

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identity, as God or nature made them, is wrong and doomed to fail. Truly, the hearts of those who persist with such error, against the discoveries of science, may be in need of reparative therapy of their own.

Some 'truths' require unlearning, either because of past misunderstanding or misinterpretation, and we must accept this unlearning as part of the search for enlightenment that we are designed to seek incessantly. Human stories, like the one in these pages, play a part in advancing understanding and acceptance. The search for love is deeply imprinted in our being. It is part of our human nature; the wellspring of all religions and of spiritualism; and it is the foundation of universal human rights.

The Hon. Michael Kirby
18 March 2004

Introduction for Heterosexual and/or Christian Readers

This review gives you some insight into what you will find in the pages of '*A Life of Unlearning – a journey to find the truth*'.

“Anthony shares his life with us with all the colour that a story-telling evangelist can capture. The honesty of his story is compelling . . . Anthony doesn't claim to be 'right', he simply tells his story. You can't argue with it. It is neither right nor wrong, it simply is. His story faces the hard issues, HIV/AIDS, Suicide, Sexual Assault, Relationships, Marriage, Parenting, Domestic Violence, Loneliness, Guilt, Shame, Rejection, Love and Sex. He has nothing to hide and it is refreshing. I recommend this book as a non-threatening way to understand and process the issues of sexuality and spirituality; however, I can't say you may not experience discomfort as the honesty in these pages invites you to be honest in your own life. Read it if you dare.”

Dr Wendell Rosevear - O.A.M., M.B.,B.S., Dip. RACOG., FRACGP.

“Read it if you dare”. That is quite a challenge, isn't it? Dr Rosevear says the reader may experience some discomfort. Christian or heterosexual readers may experience that discomfort when sexual experiences are described. To tell the complete story of resolving the issue of my sexual orientation openly and honestly, it was impossible to remove certain sexual experiences.

How explicit I was regarding those sexual experiences was a major consideration and because of that, some things have been omitted and others toned down. When you have such a broad readership, it is difficult to choose the content that will please everyone. Leaving some things out makes people feel like the story isn't real and that the writer is holding something back.

In '*A Life of Unlearning*', every account of a sexual experience has been included for a particular reason, i.e. to give insight into the journey. According to one's own experience, sex can be meaningless, addictive, abusive, or the most profound act of love and intimacy two individuals can experience, whether they are of the same or opposite sex. Examples in my story are there to reflect the variety of experience and were not intended to be offensive or to titillate.

I felt that my story would only be valid if I was completely honest, and that telling it 'warts and all' was essential. One radio announcer called it 'brutal honesty'. The common thread in most reviews is praise for the honesty.

May I suggest that if the reader is finding a section particularly awkward or offensive, then flip over a few pages and you'll be back into the story. There will be times you may feel sorry for me, times you'll be angry with me, and times you could even be disgusted by my behaviour. All I ask is that you suspend judgement until you've read the entire story to see where it all ends.

I invite you to walk with me on my journey and think what you might have done in my situation – as a man who loved God with all his heart, who tried so desperately to live a life pleasing to Him,

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a man who has shared your beliefs about homosexuality, but who was forced, by his own struggle, to grapple with these issues and finally found a place of healing, resolution and integrity.

Sincerely

Anthony Venn-Brown

Prologue

In 2004, standing before the 350 people who had gathered to celebrate the launch my book *A Life of Unlearning*, I had a strong sense that my story would impact lives. I was unaware however, just how many lives would be changed and also the vast range of backgrounds readers would come from. The emails began arriving the first week *A Life of Unlearning*, hit the shelves and continue to this day. My publisher has never seen anything like it. Some emails share their own personal tragedy or struggle while others tell me of the healing they experienced as they reached the final chapters. I'd suspected my story was much more than just the conflict of same-sex-orientation and Christianity, it was essentially about the struggle every human being faces in order to live authentically. Being true to yourself.

As Gary Fishlock, the editor of SX magazine said in his review, *'Ultimately, as the theme that emerges is about being true to yourself, 'A Life of Unlearning' should be compulsory reading for every man, woman and child, whether they're gay or straight, young old, religious or non-religious.'*

Each of us experience conditioning and pressures from family, friends, church, society, corporations, marketers to be and act in a certain way in order to be accepted. To be true to yourself, to have personal integrity and live authentically will come at a price.

The emails come from parents whose children are gay or lesbian, devastated wives whose husbands have come out, parents of young children who are determined to now allow their kids to be who they were meant to be, parents who had rejected their children have become reconciled, people who had lived with a sense of shame and failure but now have courage and hope. The word 'inspired' appears repeatedly.

Even more surprising are the emails from straight people and others with no religious background, saying how much they related to my journey.

And so in 2004 I entered the most fulfilling time of my life knowing that my complete, and as one radio announcer called it, 'brutal' honesty had created a space for people to face their own demons and experience transformation. *A Life of Unlearning* is a total exposure because I'm convinced this story has no value unless the entire truth is told. I'm not proud of everything I've done but these chapters contain the pieces that make up the jigsaw puzzle of my life. This is the truth.

When I left my Christian world in 1992, the new world I entered knew nothing of my previous existence as a preacher. Eventually, when I felt comfortable enough to talk about the past, the frequent response was, 'Oh my God, why don't you write a book?' My immediate reaction was that it would be too painful to dig into the past and look again at incidents I'd intentionally buried and intended to forget. Others suggested the act of writing would be therapeutic and cathartic, but I needed a greater reason to write. In the May of 1999 that reason came.

Up until this point my life was like an incomplete jigsaw puzzle, and while some pieces were rich in colour, representing many wonderful experiences, others were incredibly dark and distorted. I'd often tried to make sense of what had happened and put the pieces together, but they just didn't fit. Amazingly, while attending a spiritual leadership program in Mexico, clarity came out of chaos and each piece came together. With the picture unfolding before me a sense of mission awakened. 'I must tell my story' was all I could think about. The first edition of *A Life of Unlearning* in 2004 was the end result, telling the story of how everything I believed about myself was challenged in

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order to finally arrive at that place of resolution, integrity and authenticity.

I write at the risk of being misunderstood, as some people will make judgments based on their own preconceived ideas and prejudices. Christian activist groups have launched email campaigns against me. That's fine. I know who I am and what I've done. Most of my life was spent pleasing others by saying and doing the things they wanted, but I was living a lie. Facing the truth meant I would hurt the people I loved the most and become an object of embarrassment, ridicule and shame. The amazing peace and freedom I have today cost me too much to consider retreating to the safety of partial disclosure.

According to my old belief system, being a Christian and homosexual was not possible. The two were incompatible, in total opposition, in fact. The constant conflict of being one person inside but presenting another on the outside for twenty-two years eventually took its toll. The real person was being suppressed, denied and hated. I spent most of my life trying to destroy the real me, doing all I could to ensure he never found expression. A suicide of the soul.

When I was forced to be honest with myself, it became impossible to resolve the beliefs that had been foundational to my life and my current reality. Many of us have had to work through years of conditioning and the consequences of accepting 'truth' without ever challenging it. But on my journey, I was led step by step to the resolution of ALL these issues. Some churches and denominations have yet to take that journey. It's very confronting and challenging for them to think they got it wrong about homosexuality. To analyse that could mean being wrong about other issues of substance as well. They fear that if one thing is proved false, then everything is up for challenge and it may all come tumbling down. Looking back though, the church has surprisingly survived the wrongs of the past such as fighting the abolition of slavery, banning interracial marriages, refusing women the vote or a place in the church and even denying that the world revolved around the sun, to name a few. I can list of at least 20 issues (including divorce) that, during my 22 years in the church, were considered evil and against scriptural standards but are now commonplace and accepted.

The church has been wrong, Very wrong. And in the process you've have hurt many people and caused such unnecessary suffering. It's bad enough that you have done this and rarely said sorry but to do it in the name of God is criminal. Your rightness is a poor substitute for righteousness. Maintaining a stand of rigidity and denial will not serve anyone— we need to engage in an open informed, intelligent, respectful dialogue. This is my goal.

A Life of Unlearning will be a story of hope for those who wonder why life can be so unfair and a story of inspiration for those seeking a higher purpose in their lives. It will give insight and understanding to people from religious backgrounds, while others will find it incredibly challenging and confronting. It's estimated that nearly 80% of the population know someone who is gay or lesbian. Perhaps the remaining 20% do as well but they're just not aware of it. So for those related to or associated with same sex oriented people these pages can help you draw closer to the ones you know and love. For the gay person, being true to yourself usually comes at a price, so I hope my story will bring healing if you're carrying the scars from your battle to gain acceptance. Most of all, I trust that by sharing my life so openly, it will take us another step closer to the day when all GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) people will experience the rights and privileges every human being is entitled to. A day when prejudice, inequality and discrimination will be no more. This is the reason I tell my story.

CHAPTER 1

The Confession

It was a tragic way to end a successful and rewarding career. At the age of forty, my entire world was caving in. I'd lived most of my life with only one ambition—to serve God and preach His word—living sacrificially in order to achieve it. During the last eight years especially, I'd seen the

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fulfilment of this lifelong dream. Now my twenty-two years of struggle, sacrifice and achievements were coming to a horrifying conclusion. Watching everything I'd accomplished crumble away by the hour left me weak and in a state of shock. I wept frequently and wondered how I could have lost all I valued in such a short space of time. That one event, ten days earlier, had caused my life to collapse like an endless line of dominoes. Deep down inside I'd feared this might happen, but like so many things in my life I had put it out of my mind, unwilling to face reality. Now reality was screaming in my face, refusing to be ignored.

I'd invested my life in becoming one of Australia's leading evangelists for the Assemblies of God Church. I was in great demand—my calendar was always booked out twelve months in advance and every weekend was spent flying all over the country, preaching at youth rallies and Australia's mega-churches. Standing before thousands of young Christian people hanging on every word I spoke was exciting and rewarding. Leading bible colleges booked me regularly for a week of lectures for their entire student body. On other occasions I'd been the guest speaker at national leaders' conferences and even been invited as the Australian representative for international religious events. My message was preaching the relevancy of Jesus Christ to a world in need, and sharing the power of God to change lives. People valued my insight because I'd successfully accomplished what so many had previously failed to do—I was a full-time evangelist. This was a common occurrence in the United States but Australia was a different story. Many prominent preachers in Pentecostal circles had tried to function as full-time evangelists, but quickly retreated to the security of a regular salary, pastoring a church. The financial pressures and demands of an itinerant ministry proved too much for many a 'starry-eyed' preacher. When I'd established my organisation, Every Believer Evangelism, eight years earlier in 1983, I had one mission—to break through the preconceived ideas and concepts of evangelism and establish the role of the itinerant evangelist as a vital and permanent ministry in the church in Australia. I really believed breaking through these barriers would make it easier for others to follow. The influence and credibility I enjoyed was no overnight success. My family and I had paid a high price to overcome the obstacles, but for some reason I'd succeeded where others had failed.

Thousands of people attended my seminars and weekend camps, and the sale of my tapes and videos had added to the impact. What thrilled me most of all was that so many had become Christians after hearing me preach, now convinced God was real and Jesus Christ could change their lives. I gained great satisfaction from the opportunities to travel overseas and lead church study tours to the United States, knowing I was bringing significant change to individuals and the denomination. But it had all come to an end.

That April Sunday morning in 1991 was beautiful. The sun was shining, the sky a cloudless, rich blue and the slight chill of the early autumn morning had melted. My family loved living on the Central Coast of New South Wales, as it was always a few degrees warmer than Sydney, people were more laid back, and life not as rushed. My wife, Helen, and I had moved there in 1988 with our daughters Rebekah and Hannah after being based in Sydney for four years. Living in Sydney had not worked out. I was away preaching for six months of the year, and the large, busy city church at Waterloo (Pastored by Frank Houston and later to become Hillsong) seemed unaware of the loneliness and isolation Helen felt, trying to raise the girls on her own. Moving to the Central Coast meant our family had a church they could call home and more importantly connect with, while providing me with a retreat from my hectic schedule.

All over the coast, families were getting ready for the regular morning service of celebration, oblivious to what they were about to encounter. During the week, Helen and I had joined the local church leaders in Sydney for the Assemblies of God National Conference at the Darling Harbour Convention Centre so I'm sure everyone was expecting to hear glowing reports about the wonderful things happening in the denomination.

The Assemblies of God denomination is part of the Pentecostal stream of Christendom (the others being Catholicism and Protestantism). About twenty-five per cent of the world's Christians today are Pentecostal or Charismatic. In each of these streams there are a variety of groups and denominations, but the Assemblies of God is by far the largest denomination in the Pentecostal

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stream. The Pentecostal movement began at the beginning of the twentieth century in the United States, with a revival of the supernatural manifestations mentioned in the New Testament, such as healing, miracles, prophecy and speaking in tongues. There are 11,000 different Pentecostal or Charismatic denominations worldwide, including the Apostolic churches—Elim, Foursquare Gospel and The Church of God in Christ, The United Pentecostal Church—just to name a few. There are also thousands of independent churches with no affiliation to a particular group. Surprisingly, the Assemblies of God in Australia began independently of the American movement. In Australia, over the last forty years, the Assemblies of God has experienced a renewal, rising out of institutional religiosity to become the fastest-growing denomination in the country. The name, Assemblies of God, was relatively unknown in Australia; most Pentecostal churches chose more contemporary names like Christian Life Centre or Christian Centre, with Hillsong being the most famous of all. The growth of Hillsong and the introduction of the Family First party to Australian politics, led by the former Assemblies of God superintendent the Hon. Andrew Evans, suddenly put the Assemblies of God in the media and public awareness in 2004.

The conference and days of turmoil were now behind us, it was Sunday and time for church. I dragged myself out of bed and showered. No breakfast that morning—I'd been unable to eat for days. I sat on the lounge with my Bible on my lap, trying to get some words of encouragement from the scriptures to help me through the next few hours. I wistfully flicked through the light rice paper pages of my well-worn Bible but they appeared transparent, as my eyes focused beyond the page, unable to settle on any particular words or phrases, whilst I fought back tears. An air of grief permeated our house, not unlike the heavy, uneasy silence that settles on a house full of relatives waiting to go to a funeral. We moved slowly and solemnly around the house, only speaking when it was absolutely necessary. Being away preaching constantly meant we treasured the rare opportunities of attending church as a family, but not this Sunday morning. Normally we'd also be early for church; this morning we'd left it until the last minute to leave ... but now it was time to go. It must be done. The leaders of the Assemblies of God told me it must be done, as this would demonstrate I was truly repentant and be a part of my healing and restoration. It was useless arguing with them as I had no emotional energy in me to oppose their decision.

The girls looked beautiful as usual, dressed in their Sunday best. Rebekah, from her moment of birth, was the type of child who attracted people with her bright personality and was often called 'little Tony', after me. Now, at the age of fifteen, she had her first perm and her sun-bleached hair frizzed uncontrollably at the sides. Hannah had inherited more of her mother's personality and, even at thirteen, had already established herself as the more conservative one, which was reflected in her hairstyle, a straight bob. She always had an inner quality that shone in her face, and the strong cheekbone structure she'd inherited from her mother's Ukrainian family meant she constantly fought off people trying to pinch her gorgeous cheeks. Spending most of our lives in the ministry meant there was little money for luxuries such as the latest fashionable labels, but Helen had an amazing knack of making the girls look a million dollars. We prided ourselves on being a very trendy, contemporary Christian family.

Helen was putting on a brave face and doing everything she could to pretend this was a normal Sunday morning. Over the last few days, I'd witnessed a strength in her I'd never seen before but it was difficult to determine what she was really feeling. Her emotions were put aside in order to sustain family cohesion. She really worried me though, knowing the stress of our crisis was driving both of us to breaking point. Only a few days earlier she'd collapsed on my office floor after making the frightening discovery, and I had to revive her. The doctor had put her on medication. There's only so much a person can take. It was also difficult to determine what my girls were really thinking. I was hoping they were too young to fully realise the implications of the day ahead, but I'm sure they were feeling confused and betrayed. Confused because of the secrecy of what was really going on, and betrayed because I'd let them down so badly; surely this could not be happening in our family. They had placed me on a pedestal, a Daddy who could do no wrong as a man of God and devoted father. Our close friends saw us as the ideal Christian family—our relationships appeared strong and we had successfully balanced family life and the demands of the ministry. The name Venn-Brown once well respected, after today, would be associated with shame and failure.

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The girls had seen some highly unusual behaviour from their Daddy over the last few weeks. Sometimes I'd be happy and bubbly, then without warning plunge into silence and depression—so unlike me and the usual cheerfulness they'd known. Two weeks before, in a restaurant, I'd broken down and cried over dinner, acknowledging the sacrifices they'd made for the Kingdom of God, announcing I'd no longer put them through this struggle. Bizarre behaviour, considering they had only ever known me as a man with a consuming sense of mission.

Sometimes, when I'd call from overseas or somewhere in Australia, they'd ask me when I was coming home and we'd cry because we missed each other so much. I'd always reassured them the sacrifices we were making were important for the Kingdom of God. Don't worry, giggles (I often called the girls 'my giggles'), your Daddy is going to become a normal Daddy and be home all the time from now on. Three days ago we'd had a family conference to discuss what had happened and I'd explained, the best I could, what the consequences would be. How does a father tell his children he's failed and because of his actions their lives would change forever? They hadn't asked any questions, just took it all in their stride, but now they were being placed under enormous pressure because of me.

We walked out into the warm sunlight and onto the pine deck. We'd been so fortunate in finding homes to rent and once again we'd been provided with a gem, nestled among a well-established tropical garden with banana trees flagging one side of the huge deck that covered the two-car garage. During summer nights we made the most of every opportunity to eat out on the deck and in the early mornings flocks of rainbow lorikeets, with their vibrant colours, visited to feed on the seeds we provided for them. The well-established trees created privacy, making our home feel like a retreat, an oasis. And only a five-minute walk to the golden sands of Terrigal Beach.

Walking underneath the deck to the carport we got into our stylish white Fairlane. The registration plate, EBE 777, had been especially chosen as an acronym of the name of my organisation Every Believer Evangelism and God's number 777 (as opposed to the devil's number 666). We'd been unable to afford a classy vehicle previously because of our lack of finance, but as the ministry became more successful, the board of trustees approved the purchase. The plush velour seating, climate and cruise controls along with the great sound system made journeying less tiring. For us this vehicle was a luxury but the purchase was justified by buying a car that was second-hand instead of brand new.

I gave Helen the keys and asked her to drive. Normally, I'd be more in control, seeing the role of driver as a reflection of my position as the biblical leader in the family unit, but this morning I was feeling physically weak. Arriving at church and walking through the crowd I tried to deflect eye contact as the briefest glance made me feel like people could see right into my soul. I didn't want it to be obvious that something was wrong but just get inside and sit down. Helen knew the fewer people I had contact with, the better, and with a firm grip on my arm manoeuvred me through the crowd. The foyer was the usual scene for a Sunday morning at 9.55am. People hugging each other, saying 'God bless you.', 'Nice to see you, Tony', 'How's the ministry going?' and 'Are you preaching this morning?' My poor efforts to smile made it obvious to most people that something was drastically wrong.

I'd already spoken with the leaders of the church so maybe the word had circulated and people were just pretending to be normal. My closest friends came to say hi one by one and seeing the sadness in their eyes and feeling their touch was almost too much. Engulfing feelings of failure as a preacher, husband, father and even as a Christian were rising within me like a flood. No. I can't break down now, I must be strong and stay in control.

People could tell something wasn't right, just by my walk and demeanour—it was the posture of a broken man—so our attempts to be inconspicuous failed as eyes followed us making our way towards the front of the auditorium.

Central Coast Christian Life Centre was one of the new Assemblies of God churches that had

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sprung up around Australia and this particular congregation had grown to around eight hundred people. Many of these churches leased warehouses or factories and converted them into auditoriums for the large congregations. Externally it still looked like a factory but an attempt had been made to tastefully appoint it inside. The cement floor had been covered with a deep charcoal carpet, though the building lacked comfort in extremes of temperature. The congregation froze in winter and sweltered in summer, but that was okay, we were Christians and supposed to make sacrifices. Three six metre banners hung at the front in a variety of colours with the words 'LOVE, JOY, PEACE' embroidered on them, but the contrast of the strong lines of corrugated iron roofing and large cement blocks in the walls overwhelmed the attempts to transform the large space.

For most people it would be difficult to think of this as a church as there were no crosses, crucifixes, stained glass windows or religious paraphernalia. Central Coast Christian Life Centre had developed a strong family emphasis with the largest portion of the congregation under thirty. The congregation's casual dress reflected the surfer/holiday culture of the coast. The Hawaiian prints, colourful T-shirts and shorts clashed with a few old faithfuls who felt that church was a place where one should wear their Sunday best. These people were leftovers from an era when men went to church in suits, women wore modest, stylish dresses and hats, and the children dressed in clothes reserved for that once-a-week event.

Pentecostal churches had long ago moved beyond the traditions of organs and hymns and the service usually commenced with half an hour of lively singing, clapping and vibrant worship, similar to the black churches of America. A ten-piece band, consisting of guitars, bass, drums, percussion and keyboards, led the worship, pumping out a contemporary sound not unlike a rock concert. The church had attracted talented musicians and singers who contributed to the professional standard of the worship and members of the congregation had composed many of the songs we sang.

I tried to join in the familiar songs but every attempt made me cry. Helen stood on one side and Paul (one of my best friends and a board member of my evangelistic organisation who'd come from Sydney especially to support me) on the other. The girls sat with their friends elsewhere in the congregation. There were moments when I thought I wouldn't make it through the service. I'd never known one could feel so numb and yet be in such pain at the same time.

Kevin, the pastor, moved up to the clear perspex pulpit to preach. Kevin was a trendy forty-year-old, part of the new breed of Assemblies of God pastors who'd rejected the conservative look of a minister, always leading the service and preaching in casual outfits. He was constantly reinventing himself with new looks, hairstyles, clothes and cars but this morning he'd chosen to wear a suit, adding to the gravity of what was going to happen. Kevin was obviously struggling as he preached the sermon; his casual, conversational style lacked its normal flow. As the service was ending, a feeling of nausea overwhelmed me, realising my time had come. What was about to happen was justified, I believed. I'd done the wrong thing. Kevin closed the service with a special announcement, 'Those of you who feel Christian Life Centre is your home church, we'd like you to stay for a few moments please, we have some church business to attend to. People that are visiting today, thank you for coming, we hope you enjoyed the service, you're free to leave.' What was about to happen would be traumatic for all concerned and certainly something not to be witnessed by visitors or non-Christians.

Helen and Paul's grips on my arms strengthened. I began to sob, an uncontrollable sobbing, beginning deep within and shaking my entire body. No, Tony, you can't let go now. Be strong.

Kevin's statement, 'Sometimes difficult things need to be done in churches and I have to let you know today that one of our leaders has fallen,' brought an instant gasp from various parts of the congregation. He then motioned for me to come forward. Suddenly I felt like an old man as I slowly rose to my feet and shuffled towards the front. Reaching the podium, I turned around to face the congregation.

I will never forget those faces.

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Whenever in town, I'd preached messages of encouragement and hope from this pulpit but the usual responsive faces were now replaced with wide eyes and mouths open in shock. Some who'd already heard the news began crying, others placed their heads in their hands and began to sob. Husbands and wives clutched each other tightly. Helen had lost her composure and was being comforted by friends. Rebekah and Hannah were sitting near the front, crying as well. The weight of my humiliation instantly increased as I became even more aware of the suffering I was causing my wife and girls. It wasn't fair. I deserved to be punished, not them.

I leant on the pulpit to support myself and counteract the weakness in my legs. I'd rehearsed the brief statement over and over again in my mind even though I knew it would take less than sixty seconds. I'd been directed to make my confession general and concise, and not to give excuses. Thank God I didn't have to mention the most horrifying detail of all—the one that would have made me the worst of all sinners. My voice trembled as I commenced. 'Last week I preached my last sermon. I'm resigning from the ministry today. I'm sorry that I have to confess to you I've committed the sin of adultery and I ask you to forgive me. I'm so sorry for the shame I have caused my wife and family, the church and God. Please forgive me.'

I wished I could have said more, even some words of justification. Or make mention of a midlife crisis or being on the edge of a nervous breakdown, or burnt out. I wanted to scream, 'Oh God, if only you knew the battles I've been through, that I've fought every single day for the last twenty-two years as a Christian.'

Now exposed and humiliated, I sobbed uncontrollably. Of course, that wasn't the entire story. I'd transgressed beyond other disgraced ministers. Kevin and other leaders from the church rushed to my aid, trying to console me, the support of their arms stopping me from collapsing on the stage. People began to weep loudly, while others sat in stunned silence. Friends helped Helen to the stage, and she stood beside me. Kevin took the microphone and began to pray. 'We thank you God for Tony's life and ministry and we ask you to heal and restore him. We pray also for Helen, Rebekah and Hannah and ask you to give them strength at this time and to let them know your love. We ask your love, power and forgiveness to surround Tony.' Prophetic words of encouragement came from various leaders saying God would take this experience to strengthen, restore and give me a ministry beyond anything I'd known before. I knew that was impossible so the words brought little comfort. I'd failed God and my time was up.

The entire congregation was now in tears—people were devastated, some shaking their heads in disbelief. This could never have happened. Tony was such a good preacher, loving husband and father. My brief confession had actually created more questions in the minds of many people. Who was it with? Was it someone in the congregation? When did it happen? How long had it been going on? Was it a once-only fall or an affair over a period of time? I knew the gossipers would fill in all the gaps.

The congregation slowly dispersed; some moved to the foyer, others walked down the front to offer words of support, and a few just held me and wept. I didn't want anyone to talk to me or touch me, let alone tell me they loved me. I was so unworthy. If ever there was a time I wished the ground would open up and swallow me, it was then.

It was done. I'd made my public confession and hoped things might become a little easier. There should have at least been a feeling of relief, like a load lifted off me. But there wasn't—just numbness. It was like a funeral and I was the corpse. In order to please God, my family and friends, I had become a person who met their expectations. So much of what I'd loved had died and the man that people had perceived me to be now ceased to exist. Had my entire life been a lie? It felt like I'd just given away the last thing I owned, my self-respect. What would be left? Was there anything worth living for?

I wondered, in view of what I'd done, if I could ever be forgiven—surely I'd live with the shame and humiliation the rest of my life? I wanted so desperately to save my family and myself from the

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pain and darkness ahead, but no, sin has its consequences and I must pay. That chance meeting with Jason, only weeks earlier, had set my life on a course I could no longer control.

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For further information, please contact info@anthonyvennbrown.com

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