Graduation
University Of Divinity

Graduation address delivered by Dr Deidre Palmer

Equipped and Empowered for Service

We are here to celebrate your education – your dedication, the intentionality with which you have engaged in your learning.

We are also here to celebrate the community of people who have supported you through this journey – faculty and staff, parents, children, partners and for many of you church congregations who have prayed for you and contributed to sustaining you.

And we are sending you out into communities – into congregations, schools and other work settings, into the wider Australian community and we pray that you will be welcomed into these contexts – for the gifts you bring and the insights you have to offer through the equipping you have received through your education from the University of Divinity and the Australian Lutheran College.

I wonder when you began this course of study; whether you had the usual introduction to occupational health and safety and risk management.

Did they include a warning about the risk of entering into a theological education? Education has power. Power to liberate or to control. Power to turn your world upside down.

There is a reason that education relates to at least two of the eight UN Millennium Development Goals. These were goals developed and adopted by 189 nations, including Australia, with the intent to halve extreme poverty by the year 2015.
Goal 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education
Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women - through education, micro-economic development and advocacy for equal treatment and opportunity.

Education has power to change people lives – to contribute to lifting them out of poverty. It has the power to equip them for employment, for a livelihood. Reading and writing gives them capacity to engage with the wider world. Education can develop our capacity to think for ourselves and to acquire knowledge that enables us to flourish.

No educational process is neutral. Both Thomas Groome, a Christian religious educator and a professor at Boston College and Paulo Freire, a major international figure in both general and religious education, highlight this theme. Richard Shaull in his opening introduction to Freire’s book, Pedagogy of the Oppressed.” describes Freire’s transformative approach to education. Freire believes “There is no such thing as a
neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument which is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes the practice of freedom’, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.” (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, p. 14)

Paulo Freire writes from the experience of his own involvement in adult literacy programs. Within these contexts, he concluded that education could be a liberating process, capable of transforming a person from an object (fatalistically accepting the way things are) into a subject, who was directed toward the transformation of their own historical context. He understands education to be a potentially powerful force for social change. Indeed, his involvement in education in Brazil was seen to be subversive and threatening to the oppressive military regime, which came to power in 1964. He was imprisoned and then exiled from Brazil. Freire writes on his imprisonment: "In fact my actual crime was that I treated literacy as more than a mechanical problem, and linked it to conscientization, which was "dangerous". It was that I viewed education as an effort to liberate men(sic)and women), not as yet another instrument to dominate them."

Now you may be thinking, what does a Brazilian educator, have to do with me and the work I will be involved in? How does this relate to the congregation I will be serving, or the school setting I will be working in? Freire developed processes that invited people to become subjects of their own history – to move from fatalistic acceptance of this reality, to seeing that they could be transformers of their social, political and personal contexts and I would underline our ecclesial contexts. As leaders in the life of our churches, I would hope that you would support and encourage people with whom you are in ministry, to see themselves as subjects, “makers of history”, who in their response to God’s call, act in ways that shape their worship, witness and service in the world towards God’s vision of love, compassion, reconciliation and justice.

As Moderator, I recently visited Wesley Social Enterprise, a program of Uniting Care Wesley Port Adelaide. This organisation understands the power of education. It is a project where people who have disabilities, develop skills and are employed in a landscaping business, baked goods business and various other projects.

Recently, Wesley Social Enterprise has partnered with “Soles for Souls” project. In Australia “Soles for Souls” has been developed by Dalice Kennedy. Dalice volunteered in Africa (in Kenya) – she discovered that children were attending school, but a number of them were only attending part-time. In some families, one child would go in the morning to school and then come home to take off their shoes, so that their sibling could wear the shoes to school in the afternoon.

Children are not allowed to attend school without shoes, because in that part of the country, parasites get in the body through bare feet and cause major health issues.
Dalice came back to Australia and started this project “Soles for Souls – collecting shoes and storing them in her family’s garage.

Wesley Social Enterprise heard about this – and offered to store and sort the shoes for sending to Africa. So people are employed to do the sorting, they bag them and ship them to Africa, so that children can go to school in shoes, and stay healthy. The project is currently working with communities in Tanzania.

This is a project which highlights the lengths to which people will go, not only for their own education, but also so that others can be educated.

As people called to the ministry of Christ you too are called to be involved in the education of others in congregations, in schools and other workplaces, in families and neighbourhoods. One of the “Graduate attributes” of the University of Divinity is Service: “Graduates are prepared for the service of others”

And this service of others draws me again to what I spoke about at the beginning: the risky nature of entering into an education and in particular a theological education. In our theological education, we encounter a God who invites us into a different way of seeing the world, a God who invites us beyond our own self interests to engage with others, a God who desires peace with justice for all people, a God who challenges our materialistic and individualistic cultural values. A God who invites us to see all people as deeply loved by God and of infinite value.

A God who calls us to exercise the gifts we have in service of God’s mission in the world. Your education is a gift – one that you have had to work hard for and pay for in many ways. It is a gift to be shared. How will you use the gift you have been given - in service of God, of the church, of the wider community? How will you use the power of your education?

Your education has a particular emphasis and a particular locus of power – a theological education – you have been exploring those things which go to our ultimate existence, the very nature of who we are and the nature of the Divine. You are engaged with making meaning and making sense of life and in your ministries – in congregations, schools and other work places, you will have opportunities in your service of others to listen to and walk alongside people who are searching and exploring those big questions. I hope that it will be as you risk the journey of walking alongside people, sharing in their lives, encouraging them to explore faith and meaning making, that you will draw from the deep well of the Christian faith to inform and bring wisdom to the insights you may offer into that space.

Your theological education has equipped you to draw from the rich and living Story of the Scriptures, of church history, and theologians throughout the centuries. Within these texts, are narratives of hope. Narratives of hope about light overcoming darkness,
love being stronger than hate, life arising from death and suffering. These are narratives of hope for the whole world. You will be bearers of these narratives of hope as you encourage people in your congregations and students in schools to reflect theologically, to immerse themselves in the Biblical story, and in turn empower them to share these narratives of hope with others.

On occasions like this one, it may not be the time to remind you, but I’m going to anyway, that this moment while it marks an ending, an achievement, is only a beginning, or part of the journey of lifelong education. God is always inviting us to grow in understanding, to deepen our relationship with God, with each other. And I hope that your theological education and your ongoing Christian formation has and will nurture in you a “holy dissatisfaction” that comes from living in the tension of the here but not yet of the coming Kingdom of God. Letty Russell describes a Christian’s sense of “disease with business as usual” when that business as usual is unjust, or dehumanizing, or diminishing people’s lives, or exploiting the life of our planet.

I hope that as we encounter the Word of God in Scriptures and in the person of Jesus Christ, we will have a discontent that is fuelled by the vision of God’s kingdom that Jesus proclaims and embodies. A kingdom where good news is proclaimed to the poor, the oppressed and captives are liberated and all people are able to flourish and enter into the abundant life that God desires for us.

I pray that as you go this night and as you engage in your various ministries that the Holy Spirit will give you courage and wisdom, to follow in the way of Jesus, whose life, death and resurrection turned the world upside down and continues to transform our lives.