

# A Life of Unlearning

## Coming Out of the Church -One Man's Struggle

by  
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### Prologue

Why expose myself? People get arrested for that. 'A *Life of Unlearning*' is a total exposé 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 tapestry of my life. This is the truth.

The new world I lived in knew nothing of my previous existence as a preacher. Eventually, when I felt comfortable enough to talk about the past, the frequent response was, '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 forgotten. 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 had been very much like an incomplete jigsaw puzzle, and while some pieces were rich in colour, representing many wonderful experiences, others were incredibly dark. I'd often tried to make sense of what had happened and put the pieces together, but they just didn't fit. Then, while in Mexico attending a global leadership program, clarity came from chaos and the pieces came together. As the picture unfolded a sense of mission awakened. 'I *must* tell my story' was all I could think about. And so this book—*A Life of Unlearning*.

According to my belief system, being a Christian and homosexual were not compatible, in fact totally opposed. After living with that internal conflict for 22 years something had to give. It seemed impossible to try and make sense of the beliefs I had based most of my life on and my current reality. Somehow, I was eventually led step by step to resolve all these issues. I, like many others have had to work through, years of conditioning and the results of accepting 'truth' without ever challenging it. Many churches and denominations have yet to take that journey, indeed are afraid to, because to admit they are wrong about homosexuality will mean they could be wrong about other things as well. They fear that if one piece is proved false, then everything is up for challenge and it may all come tumbling down. Pretending will not make it go away. Maintaining a stand of rigidity and denial will not serve anyone. We need an open dialogue.

I know I write at the risk of being misunderstood, as some people will make judgments based on their own preconceived ideas and prejudices. 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. Finally being honest with myself cost me everything I held dear: my marriage, family, career, business and friends. Facing the truth meant I would hurt people I loved the most and become an object of embarrassment, ridicule and shame. The wonderful place of integrity, peace and resolution I now live in cost me too much to consider retreating to the safety of partial disclosure.

This is a story of hope for those who wonder why life can be so difficult and unfair. It's also a story of inspiration for those who are seeking a higher purpose and meaning in their lives. It will give insight and understanding to people from religious

backgrounds, and it will challenge many people. For those related to or associated with gay people these pages could help you draw closer to the ones you know and love. For the gay person, it may help to heal if you've battled to gain acceptance for who you truly are. I trust that my story will be used to take us another step closer to the day where all homosexual people will experience the rights and privileges every human being is entitled to. A day when prejudice and discrimination will be no more. This is the reason I tell my story.

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## 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 preach God's word—and worked desperately hard to achieve it. During the last eight years especially, I'd seen the 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 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 Assembly 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 largest congregations. Standing before thousands of young Christian people hanging on every word I spoke was exciting and rewarding. Prominent 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 commenced 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. My family and I had paid a high price to overcome the obstacles and 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 thousands 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 US, 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 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 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 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. The Assemblies of God had experienced a renewal, rising out of institutional religiosity to become the fastest growing denomination in Australia. I'm sure everyone was expecting to hear glowing reports about the wonderful things happening in the denomination.

I'd dragged myself out of bed and showered, and now sat on the lounge with my Bible on my lap. No breakfast that morning—I'd been unable to eat for days. I was 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.

An air of grief permeated the Venn-Brown household 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. We usually treasured the rare opportunities of attending church together, but not this Sunday morning. Normally we'd be early for church, this morning we'd left it until the last minute to leave....but now it was time to go. It had to be done. The leaders of my denomination told me it *must* be done, as this was a part of my healing and restoration, demonstrating I was truly repentant. 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 side of the 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. When the girls were younger, we often dressed them in the same outfits made for them by their generous Babushka, but now they were very much individuals and the thought of dressing them the same was ridiculous. 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 tell what she was really feeling as she had put her emotions aside in order to sustain the family cohesion. I was really worried about her though, knowing the stress of our crisis was driving both of us to breaking point. She'd been placed on medication and only a few days before had collapsed on my office floor after making the frightening discovery. 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, disbelief that this could be happening in our family; and betrayal because I'd let them down so badly. In their eyes, Daddy could do no wrong and they had placed me on a pedestal as a man of God and devoted father. Even our close friends saw us as the ideal Christian family—we had strong relationships and successfully managed to balance family life and the demands of the ministry.

The girls had seen some very 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.

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. Sometimes, when I'd call from overseas or somewhere in Australia, we'd cry because we missed each other so much but 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') you'll be seeing much more of Daddy from now on.

We slowly 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 amongst a well-established tropical garden with banana trees flagging one side of the huge deck that covered the two-car garage. During balmy summer nights we made the most of every opportunity to eat out on the deck and flocks of rainbow lorikeets, with their vibrant colours, visited early in the morning to feed on the seeds we provided for them. Tall 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. To ensure people didn't judge us as extravagant, 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 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 to just get inside and sit down. Helen knew the fewer people I had contact with, the better, and with a firm grip of 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's'. 'Nice to see you, Tony'. 'How's the ministry going?' 'Are you preaching this morning?' I tried to smile but it was 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 wave of charismatic churches that had 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 twenty-foot 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 Australians 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 surfer/holiday culture of the coast was reflected in the congregation's casual dress—Hawaiian prints and 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.

Our denomination 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, lead 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. To the outsider it would have appeared to be a normal morning service although a little faster paced than usual.

Kevin, the pastor, moved up to the perspex pulpit to preach. Kevin was a trendy forty year old and part of the new breed of Assembly of God pastor who'd rejected the conservative look of a minister, always leading the service and preaching in casual outfits. He was constantly re-inventing 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 not be pleasant 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, that began to shake my entire body. No Tony, you can't let go now. Be strong.

Kevin made a statement about difficult things needing to be done in churches sometimes and that one of our leaders had fallen, bringing about 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 remember the faces.

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 what my wife and girls were going through. 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 that my confession should be general, concise and without 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, like some words of justification, maybe a midlife crisis or being on the edge of a nervous breakdown, or burnt out. 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, whilst 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 power and forgiveness to surround Tony.' Prophetic words of encouragement came from various leaders saying God would take this experience to strengthen, restore and use me but they brought little comfort; I knew my time was ended.

The entire congregation was now in tears as 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. If ever there was a time I wanted the ground to open up and swallow me it was then. I didn't

want anyone to talk to me or touch me let alone tell me they loved me. I was so unworthy.

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, so much of what I'd loved had died and the person people had perceived me to be no longer existed. I wondered, in view of what I'd done, if I could ever be forgiven—surely I'd live with the shame the rest of my life?

Had I known what was ahead, suicide would have been a good option. The pressures, isolation and humiliation would prove too much. I wanted so desperately to save my family and myself from the 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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