

# Don't judge a cleric by their dog collar!

Marathon runner and sports enthusiast is the Rector of the Parish Church of St Margaret, Barming



## Up and Running

Marathon runner, sports enthusiast and father to Danny and Kezzie, Wil North is the Rector of the Parish Church of St Margaret, Barming. He has a BA degree in youth and community work with applied theology.

Wil (sic) North's study displays a plethora of religious texts and books on sport like karate, intermingled with photos of sports teams and events. With a certificate of higher education in yacht and power craft design, and a stash of impressive marathon medals on display, it would be erroneous to assume that life for Wil has always been straightforward and that he has walked an easy path so far.

Born in Woolwich, the son of a Metropolitan Police Officer who retired to Norfolk, Wil

completed his primary education in Bexleyheath and secondary education in Norwich. Just shy of his son's eighteenth birthday, Wil's dad died suddenly from cancer, and missed seeing his son go to the University of Southampton to study yacht and power craft design; an interest they shared. Wil said, "Over the next six months, both of my nans and a close great-aunt died. The family kept saying, 'you have to be the man now' and I went to university a very angry young man, suppressing my grief."

Alcohol dependent, Wil knew he was drinking more than everyone else, but he did not recognise it as a problem. He said, "I was not dealing with my emotions. Instead, I would drink neat whisky on the way to a club and quickly discovered that this numbed my pain. Drink is a part of my journey to faith. I couldn't get out of bed without a bottle of Jack Daniels. At the end of my second year, I got into trouble with the police."

An argument that could have escalated was initially avoided when a girlfriend's ex-boyfriend walked away from Wil in a potentially explosive situation. Wil said, "He was the bigger man, but I followed him home. In the end, I was charged with being drunk and disorderly, criminal damage, grievous bodily harm (GBH) and resisting arrest. I was given an option by a police officer who recognised that I had made some bad choices. I accepted a police caution and agreed to attend counselling."

The counselling wasn't successful. Wil said, "The counsellor was rubbish and started the session by saying 'I know how you feel'. That was it for me, I walked out and never went back. I didn't have a faith at this stage, but I now know God was holding the reins and steering me a bit. I went home, cried and then prayed for the first time. I asked God to sort me out."

Vicars often talk about God being a God of love, but they don't always explain what that means, and so I felt betrayed. Where was their God of love?"

I calmed down a bit and I realised my way of living this life was not good. I started asking questions of the only true Christian I knew, a friend from karate called Fliss. She threw a Bible at me and told me to read it. It took me three months to devour the New Testament.

Raised by a father who believed that if he didn't see any bad behaviour, then there was no punishment, Wil admits he learned to be the 'golden boy' at home. He said, "I was part of a gang at home in Norfolk and people would cross the road to avoid me. I hid my behaviour and my drinking from Mum and later, Fliss. I was reading Romans and Paul is very against drunkenness and violence, but I felt let down by God. He had shown me something I could never have. He had dangled a carrot and denied it to me. I was very angry with God about how he had cheated me. A month later, my best friend James asked me when the last time I had had an alcoholic drink had been. I really had to think about it, but it had been about a month earlier. God had blinded me to my need for alcohol. I left university in June and by September, I was going to church."

Fliss is four years younger than Wil and back at home in Norwich, his vicar who he describes as "astute" recognised that Wil needed direction. Wil said, "My vicar threw me into youth work, so I learned most of my theology from eight year olds! They would ask questions that I couldn't answer,



so I had to find out and go back to them the next week. I claim that my moment of becoming a Christian was that year. I was asked, 'Are you a Christian?' but I didn't know!

Eventually, I stood on a pool table and shouted, 'I am a Christian!' and that was part of my route into faith."

Passion for the Church and faith was in Wil's heart. By now, he had left university and returned to work in the boatyard that he had been working in from the age of thirteen. He said, "The boatyard owner gave me a real rollicking for dropping out, but I went to work for her for twelve months before becoming a draughtsman. I was unsettled and thought about becoming a policeman, studying theology with a view to ordination or maybe youth work, because I was already doing a lot of that."

Opting to go through police force selection, Wil cleared every hurdle until the last interview. He said, "I was told, 'we don't want you – go off and be a vicar!' It was very hard to hear, but God was guiding me. The Church came out in the interview and God closed one door and opened another for me."

Wil puzzled over what to do next; to work in Christian youth ministry or study theology? The answer came in the form of a part time job in a local church, who appointed Wil as their Christian youth ministry leader. He explained, "I first felt the call to ordination after my first role in youth ministry when I was about 22. I was advised to leave it for a while because I wasn't ready and God would bring it back to me. Sure enough, I worked in Cheam and felt very strongly that I was being called again. During an interview, I was asked, 'Where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?' and I said, 'In your chair wearing a dog collar!' I was

really tested over the next four years. By 2005, I was resisting it and ignoring God. I thought vicars were old, boring and fat! I went to New Wine and God revealed His plans for me.

Eventually, Wil's name was put forward by the Diocese of Guildford and he was ordained in 2009 having trained at St John's College, Nottingham. He worked at the Church of St Peter in Farnborough and then came to his current role in the Parish Church of St Margaret in Barming.

Describing himself as a bit of a sporting all-rounder, Wil said, "I never excelled at sport at school. When I was about 16 I got into Shotokan karate and loved fighting; it requires a lot of stamina. (He reached brown belt.) I'm quite a competitive person and have always been able to run. I have changed now and really enjoy team sports, but I also like time away. When I'm running it's just me and God. It's part of my stress management and spiritual space. I started running in order to help my karate, but in the end, it took over really!"

Sport has found a natural place in Wil's ministry. He explained, "When I was at St Peter's church, my ministry involved men and sports. I set up and helped run a football team and a running club. I also offered chaplaincy at a local gym; members came to talk to me and staff gravitated towards me. Gyms can be very lonely places, with people in a community but isolated with their ipods. I was just finding people where they were. I had been a gym member for over a year, so people knew me and there was a real sense of community. People would stay after their workouts and have a coffee and a chat – I sort of ran a mini Alpha course!"

To date, Wil has run an impressive 18 marathons, starting with his first in 2011. Wil's ambition has grown from wanting to complete 10 marathons by the time he was 40, to completing 50 marathons by the time he is 50. Although there is always a risk of over-training or injury from such a punishing

regime, Wil completed two marathons in the same week last year and has run 8 in 2015 at the time of writing.

Wil said, "Running is a part of my spirituality. Whilst I am running, I spend a lot of time thinking about scripture and talking to God." I write most of my sermons when I am out running, and draft things like the editorial for our church magazine. Running is this lone conversation with God."

According to Wil, parkrun is the ideal church. He said, "I love it because the super-

fit, fast guys are at the front and people bringing their dogs and pushing their buggies are at the back. Everyone is really supportive and encouraging. In a way, people need sign-posting. They need to be given permission to bring their friends. parkrun demonstrates how church should, and does, run. I'll often ask people if they have considered parkrun and people there know me as the vicar who runs. That's great, because more people now come and talk to me. This is what ministry is all about; I'd rather run with it!"

For more information about parkrun, please visit: <http://www.parkrun.org.uk/>  
For more information about the Church of St Margaret in Barming, please visit: <http://www.stmargaretsbarming.org.uk/>

