

How cancer catapulted me into the unknown

SIX years ago, Erica Wilkie was happy – she had a secure job, grandchildren to care for, and didn't want to change a thing.

An unexpected diagnosis of skin cancer changed everything. Erica went through surgery and was given the all-clear, but then felt she had unfinished business in her life. She wondered about becoming ordained as a clergy person, but thought she was too old.

Then her workplace closed suddenly, and her son and his family moved away – meaning she was no longer needed for childcare. Suddenly she had time and space to respond to God's call. Erica spent three years learning theology, and now she's preparing to be ordained, along with other deacons and priests, in our cathedral on June 29.

"Most of us long for stability and comfort in our lives, but sometimes life can take an unexpected turn and we are catapulted into the unknown," she said. "Do we ignore it, embrace it, or crumple under it? Whatever choice we make, life changes."

Erica, now 58, was a library officer for Hampshire County Council six years ago, helping detainees at the Immigration Removal Centre in Haslar, when she had her skin checked. She was shocked when the biopsy results confirmed she had malignant melanoma.

As she waited for surgery, she reflected on all the possible outcomes. She had been a Christian since the age of seven, and knew

Ordinations 2019

Deacons:

Hugo Deadman (to serve at St James, Milton); **Ryan Forey** (Harbour Church); **Ruth Howlett-Shiple**y (Shedfield and Wickham); **Dion Mabey** (St John, Ryde); **Mike Moritz** (St John, Locks Heath); **Bryan Stephenson** (St Luke, Southsea); and **Erica Wilkie** (Leesland pioneer and Gosport deanery).

Priests:

The Revs Philippa Good (St Andrew, Farlington); **Dan and Jude Greenfield** (both Crofton parish), **Wendy-May Jacobs** (Holy Trinity with St Columba, Fareham), **Julie Minter** (St Wilfrid, Cowplain), **Stephen Sutcliffe** (Northwood and Gurnard with St Faith, Cowes) and **Jacqueline Twine** (St Luke, Portsea)



Erica Wilkie

that her family would trust God, but it wasn't easy to stay positive.

However, after she received the all-clear, she happened to see a flyer, inviting people considering lay or ordained church ministry to an event. She felt compelled to attend, even though she felt too old and too busy. But it niggled away until she spoke with her then vicar at Holy Rood Church, Stubbington.

She began to go through the process, but was looking for a clear sign from God. When her workplace closed suddenly and her role made redundant, and when her childcare responsibilities ended, she felt this was an indication for her life to change direction. She

was accepted to train for ordained ministry as a permanent deacon, with Portsmouth Pathway,

"It wasn't easy to study again," she said: "Theology is a demanding subject, and I quickly realised there were gaps in my understanding of a faith I have lived for most of my life. Alongside studying, I've had opportunities for practical experience – leading church services, preaching, visiting schools and helping with a community project."

That project was in Leesland, Gosport, alongside pioneer minister the Rev Tim Watson. Erica helped with Prayer Spaces in Schools, the Trash Café, and the vision for a clothing exchange.

"I loved Leesland and working with Tim. We are different in our gifts and experience, yet connect in our passion for serving God and serving community," she said.

She was pleased to discover she'd be a curate in Leesland, and also licensed to the deanery. She said: "As an older curate and long-time Christian, I have served in many different capacities and areas of parish life. I can't wait to see how God will use me in this new context."