

MEDIA RELEASE

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Former chemist who helped establish ACU awarded honorary doctorate

Emeritus Professor Gabrielle McMullen AM has been awarded an honorary doctorate from Australian Catholic University (ACU) for her contributions to Catholic education and church institutions.

One of the original members of the Senate at the time of the establishment of ACU in 1991, Professor McMullen has held numerous positions in governance and leadership at the university, including Rector of the Ballarat Campus and then Pro- and Deputy-Vice Chancellor (Academic) until 2011.

“As a student and young academic, I had been intrigued by the potential of a Catholic university within the Australian higher education,” Professor McMullen said.

“When ACU emerged, it was a privilege to be able to contribute to the development of the University.

“It is now a singular honour to receive ACU’s highest award and I express my deep gratitude to the University for this recognition of my contributions to the community and to humanity.”

ACU Vice-Chancellor and President Professor Zlatko Skrbis said Professor McMullen was a pioneering leader.

“Her career is defined by contributions to Catholic education through roles that advanced the mission and identity of the Church,” Professor Skrbis said.

“In recognising Professor McMullen with an Honorary Degree of Doctor of the University, we commend her for her commitment to academic integrity, equality of opportunity and community engagement through work with educational and religious organisations, particularly in the areas of health and aged care, bioethics, Catholic education and theology and social service ministries.”

Professor McMullen’s decades-long contribution to Catholic ministries started when she was a young chemist with the Department of Biochemistry at Monash University. The position of Dean had opened at Mannix College, Monash’s Catholic residential college, and Professor McMullen was on the shortlist.

“I became the first lay Dean of the College and was in the role for 14 years while still a lecturer in the Medical faculty at Monash,” Professor McMullen said.

While Dean of Mannix College, she met Sir Bernard Callinan, who was Council chair of the Institute of Catholic Education, one of the predecessor colleges of ACU.

“I really had a passion for Catholic universities, but at that time people thought it was just not possible to have a Catholic university in Australia,” Professor McMullen said.

“It was so exciting when the four Catholic education colleges at the time united to become ACU.”

Professor McMullen said ACU’s growth locally and internationally, and the advances in research, had positioned ACU as a leading Catholic university.

“ACU has a significant presence in Australian higher education sector and enriches the sector because of its mission,” Professor McMullen said.

Professor McMullen said she was particularly proud of ACU’s growth in Community Engagement, which has delivered programs like Clemente Australia, which provides higher education to people who would otherwise be excluded, and as a Dame of the Order of Malta, the ACU and Order of Malta Community Hub outreach in the City of Darebin in Melbourne.

“To have the university out in the public square making a difference in people’s lives, it’s bringing communities together and addressing disadvantage and real-world problems,” Professor McMullen said.

Professor McMullen continues to make academic contributions, specifically her work into the lay governance model known as the ministerial public juridic persons and has become a prominent Catholic thought-leader in matters of health and aged care, bioethics, theology, and social services.

She recently finished writing a paper on the contributions of Fr Anthony Kelly CSsR, a former Professor of Theology at ACU, who died in 2024.

Despite having a chemical reaction named after her, Professor McMullen’s own research doesn’t revolve around scientific advancements these days.

“I’m a long way from the chemistry I did at Monash but you can bring your research skills to other areas, and at least for me, it’s now more interesting writing a paper on Tony Kelly than methyleneketene,” Professor McMullen said.

Professor McMullen said Catholic ministries and agencies were always in need of people “who wanted to build a better society”.

“There’s a real need for people who want to make a difference to get involved in Catholic ministries and contribute,” Professor McMullen said.

“The students who have a chance to do their nursing, teaching, paramedicine or law at ACU can bring their values and deeper understanding to the ministries they undertake.

“Many ACU graduates have gone on to make extraordinary contributions. To me being in ministry, it’s not about a career, it’s about being able to bring those values in your heart to what you’re doing.”