



COMMUNITY

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AUDIT BUREAU
OF CIRCULATIONS



Father Simon Robinson with his work vehicle, a 2012 1731cc Victory Judge, which has led all four Gannawarra toy runs and done its 70,000km mostly in the shire. **INSET:** Fr Robinson and his wife, Katrina.

People's priest heeds call

JENNY DENTON

WHEN Father Simon Robinson presides at his final Anglican Church service in the shire on Sunday, it will be eight years to the day since he rolled into Kerang to take up the role of priest of the Gannawarra cluster.

Since then, with his wife Katrina and other church and community volunteers and workers, he has started a community Christmas lunch, instigated the creation of a refugee support group, helped set up a bi-monthly men's breakfast and kick-started the Gannawarra toy run - which raises \$20,000 a year in cash and donations for local children and families - as well as organising Bible studies groups and children's holiday activities and tending his flock and others in need over an area of 100 square kilometres.

"I've tried to be a permission-giver or look for opportunities and seize them," Fr Simon says.

"Things like the toy run and the men's brekky in Cohuna, they weren't my ideas but I tried to give the space and the support for those ideas to get up, and they really have."

The "priest of the people", who wears rings on most fingers, brews his own beer, doesn't mind swearing and rides a big American motorbike, doesn't take leaving lightly.

"Moving was certainly not my idea," he said.

"These communities mean a lot to me. I

was looking forward to finishing my time and getting an extension. I was hoping they'd give me one."

But the request to relocate before his 10-year tenure was up came from the highest authority, the Anglican Bishop of Bendigo, Dr Matt Brain.

"The bishop came and asked me to take on another job. There's a church in Mooropna, where I started, that's had some significant losses over the last 15 years. Three of the priests have died and another one was injured. They've just had one blow after the other really. The bishop wants someone who knows them so they don't have to start from scratch all over again. And he feels that what I've offered here will help them to get moving again. They're looking for someone to come along and lead them in more community engagement."

Fr Simon said, "You can say 'no' to the bishop but he did say to me, 'I want you to talk to God about this.'"

That conversation lasted three months and was a major struggle for the priest.

"God kept telling me just about every day for three months, 'Look I want you to go. Staying is not going to be an option'."

"I gave my life to Him when I thought I was going to die. Am I going to back down on that now when he's been so good to me?"

Fr Simon's conversion came 20 years ago

after a desperate appeal to God was answered.

In acute pain and rendered helpless by severe Crohn's disease, he put out a call for help.

"I said, 'If you're real, I'll spend whatever time I've got left working for you'. And suddenly God was in the room. There was this presence in the room that washed over me from above."

"I was like, 'Shit, God is real!'"

But the path to religion and priesthood wasn't an easy one.

There was a period of secrecy, because the former atheist was too scared to tell his friends and family what had happened.

"I started sneaking this Bible in my pocket at work and sneaking out at lunch hour to read it on the bench outside the shopping centre. I would've felt more comfortable reading a porno mag in front of everyone!"

Getting himself inside a church building was even harder.

But when he finally did, things started to fall into place.

He and Katrina met not long after at a pastoral counselling course.

He was a "burly bouncer" who "didn't look like a counsellor, let alone a priest," his wife of 15 years says.

"But gosh he was a good listener!"

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Weather

Temperatures

Thursday: minimum 26.6 degrees, maximum 40.3 degrees. Friday: 26.5, 39.3. Saturday: 15.9, 32.6. Sunday: 16.3, 37.2. Monday: 18.7.

January minimums: lowest 12.1 degrees [10th], highest 26.6 degrees [17th], average 17.8 degrees [long-term average 15.5 degrees]. Lowest on record: 5.8 degrees [18th, 1966]. Highest on record: 30.9 degrees [26th, 2003].

January maximums: lowest 26.0 degrees [5th], highest 46.0 degrees [16th], average 37.4 degrees [long-term average 31.6 degrees]. Highest on record: 46.0 degrees [16th, 2019]. Lowest on record: 16.2 degrees [5th, 1991].

Rainfall

Month to date: 0.4mm [long-term average 23.1mm]. Last year to January 21: 5.4mm. [long-term January average: 23.1mm]. Highest on record: 160.8mm [2011]. Lowest on record: 0.0mm [1882].

Evaporation

Weekly pan evaporation: 57.4mm.



Source: Bureau of Meteorology.

Forecast

Today: Hot, sunny, 21-41
Wednesday: Hot, sunny, 23-42
Thursday: Hot, sunny, 24-43
Friday: Hot, mostly sunny, 27-39
Saturday: Hot, mostly sunny, 20-38
Sunday: Showers, 20-32

Daylight

Today	sunrise 6.31am sunset 8.40pm
Wednesday	6.32am, 8.40pm
Thursday	6.33am, 8.39pm
Friday	6.34am, 8.38pm
Saturday	6.35am, 8.38pm

Ultra-violet index

Sun protection recommended from 9.10am to 5.50pm, UV Index predicted to reach 14 [Extreme].

Fire danger

Mallee: High. Northern Country: High. Fire danger and restrictions information is available from www.cfa.vic.gov.au



AUSTRALIA DAY 2019

Saturday 26 January

COMMUNITY CELEBRATIONS

Koondrook/Barham: Riverside Park Barham, 7.00am with guest speaker Marilyn Harper

Kerang: Atkinson Park, 7.30am with guest speaker Damian Brown

Cohuna: Garden Park, 8.00am with guest speaker Alma Besserdin

Murrabit: Murrabit Market Lions Shelter, 8.00am with guest speaker Celeste Pearce

Lalbert: Lalbert Community Park, 8.30am with guest speaker Aris Imbardelli

Quambatook: Quambatook Memorial Hall, 8.30am with guest speaker Professor Bruce Bonyhady AM

Leitchville: Leitchville Sporting Complex, 6.30pm with guest speaker Alma Besserdin



Australia Day



GANNAWARRA Shire Council



ROCK & ROLL Festival 2019

DAILY PASS \$15
FESTIVAL PASS \$35
BREAKFAST IN THE HUTS \$16

FRIDAY 1ST TO SUNDAY 3RD
FEBRUARY 2019

PERFORMANCES COMMENCE 7:30PM
FRIDAY 1ST FEBRUARY & CONCLUDE 1:00PM SUNDAY 3RD FEBRUARY.

SPOOKS & KOOKS SATURDAY GALA NIGHT
WITH HONKY TONK ROCKERS FROM 7:30PM
DRESS UP AS YOUR FAVOURITE SPOOKY & KOOKY CHARACTER
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Friday, Saturday, Sunday



HONKY TONK ROCKERS

Saturday, Sunday



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Friday, Saturday

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Webster Nationals' choice

FROM — Front Page

MR Walsh estimated that 200 members had turned up to vote at the Birchip meeting.

He said the next step for Dr Webster was to "get out on the ground campaigning until the federal election."

The new candidate would have a lot of homework to do on local issues, he said.

"The perennial issue is all around water," Mr Walsh said of concerns in the Gannawarra shire area.

"She needs to put a lot of work into getting herself up to speed."

Benjeroop farmer Lindsay Schultz, who is backing independent Ray Kingston for the seat, said regardless of the candidate, Mallee voters were bound to be taken for granted if they voted Nationals.

"My opinion is it doesn't matter who they put in. The people in this electorate need to realise that the Coalition are not obliged to spend any money here because it's such a safe seat. So we don't get new hospitals and schools. If we got an independent or at least went marginal, it would become a political issue," he said.

"If we get half a dozen independents in Canberra, we have a voice."

"People have got to look at the big picture."

Mr Kingston operates a dryland sheep and cropping farm at Rupanyup in the Wimmera.

The vast electorate of Mallee, which encompasses 12 shires or parts of shires, has been held by the Nationals - formerly the Country Party - since it was created in 1949.

It was won by Andrew Broad in 2015 with a margin of nearly 20 per cent.



DR WEBSTER

Dr Webster said that if she was elected she would "continue to be a strong advocate for my community" and was "excited to take up the fight for the people of regional Victoria."

"I'm looking forward to talking to as many people as possible in Mallee over the next few months," she said.

The next Federal election is scheduled to be held later this year. Other Mallee candidates are yet to be announced.

Peoples' priest heeds call

FROM — Page 2

IT was a key quality for the career he was headed for and the job he would take up with the Gannawarra Cluster of the Anglican Church, which includes parish churches at Cohuna, Gunbower, Leitchville and Kerang.

"It's a great privilege to go into people's homes and be welcomed," Fr Simon said.

"People quite often need to talk. They don't have much opportunity to do that, especially about stuff that really matters."

Another characteristic of his priesthood is versatility, he believes.

In addition to delivering several weekly sermons, which can be "an ordeal" to prepare, in his time in the shire he has accompanied defendants to court, sat with dying patients in hospital, chatted with people in the gutter, ferried mental health patients to hospital, rallied people to ride motorbikes and donate fluffy toys for charity and sold raffle tickets in the street.

"There's no other job that has such variety," he says.

While there are "still struggles" in his assimilation into church culture, Fr Simon believes Anglicanism has the "breadth of expression" to accommodate a convert like him.

"Mostly I've found Anglicans to be fairly earthy characters. They'll enjoy a beer or a good red wine and they'll probably use the occasional swear word and won't get too ruffled if people are a bit offensive," he said.

A standout memory among so many over the last eight years was a moment during the 2018 toy run.

"We were coming across the causeway there at Sleepy Lane and I looked back and just saw the hundred-odd motorcycles lined up along the levee bank behind me, and they were following me. It was overcast and you could see all the headlights and the silhouettes. And I was like, 'Wow, I just have the coolest job in the world!'"

A more sombre experience that will stay with him was the priest's relationship with Barry Wilson, a truck driver who had been "profoundly damaged" by sexual abuse in the care of the Christian Brothers at St Augustine's Orphanage in Geelong.

Barry, who was the inspiration for

establishing a community Christmas lunch in the shire, had a history of alcohol abuse and in 2014 developed liver cancer, which escalated quickly.

"I supported him through his horrendous journey through cancer," Fr Simon said, "and also when the Royal Commission came up and interviewed him at his bedside. I was sort of walking beside all of that."

"Just before he died he was ready to come back to church. Then his family, who obviously had no good relationship with the church, wanted me to do his funeral, which was just amazing considering where he'd been. He found healing in his relationship with the church. That's the sort of stuff that I'm in this job for. I just wish he would've been given some healing in his body."

Local shire councillor, Mark Ariens, who according to Fr Simon has been a key ally in his community work, described the unconventional priest's impact in the shire as extending "well beyond the church boundaries."

"He's probably done more than any other public figure to unite the communities of Kerang, Cohuna and Koondrook in recent times, through the toy run, the Cohuna men's breakfast, the refugee support group and attendance at almost every community event," Cr Ariens said.

"We wish both him and Katrina well but are sorry to see them go."

Fr Simon and Katrina are hopeful that a dynamic replacement will soon be found to lead the Anglican Church cluster, which has now been reduced from three to two parishes.

In the meantime, they say an excellent lay leadership may benefit from more head room.

"Maybe they need a few runs by themselves," says Katrina, the crucial other half of the people's priest.

"And maybe part of it all is that the community here may be ready for someone else."

Fr Simon and Katrina will be farewelled at a Holy Communion service at 11am on Sunday, followed by a shared lunch at St John's Anglican Church in Kerang. Everyone is welcome to attend.