

Saint Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark
Sunday 22nd October, 2017

(Rev Rowena Harris of the High Country Patrol visited our congregation this Sunday.
This article was compiled by Franklyn from UCA website & notes given by Rowena)

Uniting Church Frontier Services Patrol Ministry - Providing counselling, spiritual and pastoral care to the people of remote Australia

Our Patrol Ministers are constantly on the road; visiting people on isolated properties, Aboriginal communities, mine sites and small communities. They are available for sacramental ministry, yet much of their time is taken up simply listening to people who face the daily challenges of isolation. ...

Patrol Ministry in remote and isolated Australia is the beating heart of Frontier Services' mission. It has been our tradition for more than 100 years to send "padres" to places like the Pilbara, Central and South Australia, The Kimberley, Western Queensland, Cape York and elsewhere.

This mobile ministry to the people of the outback commenced with the Australian Inland Mission (AIM) and Federal Methodist Inland Mission (FMIM) in the early 20th Century. It is a bond that reaches across generations.

The foundation stone of all activities which Frontier Services offers outback people is facilitated by the renown of its Patrol Ministry. Since the days of Rev Dr John Flynn, the mobile "padre" has been a byword for compassionate care, counselling, work and companionship to outback families. Even in our modern day, there is no "digital" or "virtual" alternative to sending an individual to remote Australia to be with the people in their daily lives.

Frontier services is still the main contributor financially to remote area ministry and will maintain primary responsibility for raising the funds to keep the patrols active into the future.

Our work is 100% funded by your kind donations, for your generosity and prayers, we thank you!

The High Country Patrol – Rev Rowena Harris

is based in Swifts Creek also services some of the area of the former Snowy River Patrol, which extends across the NSW border.

This patrol ministry operates in partnership with the Gippsland Presbytery. While the formal Frontier Services Patrol began in January 2008, ministry in the region has been established for many years.

The main church, in Swifts Creek, has a small but involved congregation, and it is supportive of Rev Rowena's involvement in the remote parts of the patrol. Swifts Creek has a population of about 1500, as does Omeo. Both towns have small, but bustling populations and activities. Some population is seasonal, with the traffic and the tourist industry, as this route is the eastern road up to the ski resorts, further on in the ranges. There is not much of a trickle-down effect, as tourists rarely stop in the townships, let alone visit the remote ranges and valleys.

The region associated with this Patrol includes townships of Omeo, Benambra, Gelantipy and Swifts Creek, the area up along the Great Alpine Road, the highway up to Mt Hotham, and also the region north of Buchan. The latter straddles the border with NSW, through the steep Alps/ Snowy Mountains. A few small villages dot the area, but many farmers live in the region, in isolated valleys, or perched on high mountain slopes. Services are scarce, even in the tiny townships, and locals bemoan the lack of supportive helping professionals.

ISSUES IN THE AREA

- Away from the main roads and ski fields... REMOTE!
- Steep and winding dirt roads
- Long travel times
- Floods, drought and terrifying bush fires are common.
- Very few helping professionals. They have limited budgets, and strict time constraints.
- Appalling seasonal weather.
- Expensive fuel and transportation costs.
- Farming and logging industries are failing.
- Debt is crippling.
- Unemployment is high.
- Mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence issues are complex.
- Educational/medical resources are scattered.
- Public transport is limited.

The Patrol Minister is one of the few professionals left in the region. Isolation is made worse here, as many farmers live in valleys accessible by only one road in and out. The Patrol Minister will drive many kilometres over the same roads. Families often cannot afford to fuel to do the same, and this adds to their isolation. Many services have been withdrawn from the region in recent years, as providers do not have the resources necessary to care for these remote and vulnerable people. Accordingly, the Rev Rowena has been seen as an integral part of the region, as she drives, visits, and offers supportive pastoral/ liturgical care. Rev Rowena has been involved in formal disaster response ministry programmes in the region. Rev Rowena is also involved in community activities and associations. As regional police chaplain, Rev Rowena visits remote stations in far East Gippsland, providing support, if requested, to personnel and their families. Rowena is involved with Neighbourhood Houses, and takes part in their activities. She can also be a resource person to staff. She meets and works alongside Uniting Care staff, especially those involved with remote families. Rev Rowena works with other helping professionals too, in joint community projects. Rev Rowena visits farms and houses throughout her region. Her visits may include worship, pastoral support or simply just 'being there'.

Transport in the region, apart from the highway to the resorts, poses difficulties. Roads are usually unsurfaced, they cling to steep mountains, winding treacherously through remote passes. Many are above the snow line. Winter's challenges make driving difficult. Snow, ice, floods, avalanches, and storms can close roads, whilst summer fires occur regularly. Much of the region is still recovering from the worst recorded fires in history, in the first few months of 2014. The fires added to the various hardships endured by many, down through the years.

The only road into the region, the highway, although in good condition, is indicative of the region's remoteness, as it weaves through the foothills of the ranges for some two hours or so of driving before townships are reached. Distances here are talked of 'in driving time' and not geographical distance, as, very frequently, cars simply cannot drive more than about 25 kms an hour. Conditions are just too chancy or downright dangerous.

The region offers a strong sense of identity as "the High Country", and utterly beautiful countryside. Closeness to the ski fields could be seen as a benefit to future patrol ministry.

Rev Rowena's ministry is often difficult and lonely, plagued by isolation and climate... But it is worth everything.

Rev Rowena brings news of the Gospel and the Kingdom to a world far removed from where you live. Her words and actions reflect her faith in a loving God of hope and promise. She likes to drive, pray and hopes for the best!