

# Presbyterian Inland Mission: On Patrol through the Mallee

© Rev D Rudi Schwartz<sup>1</sup>

Dear Folk,

There was not a lot of water under the bridge, although you have not heard from me for a while. The drought in our part of the world is too severe. Victoria has experienced its driest October on record, with only October 1902 perhaps being drier.

My first stop was in Swan Hill where is put in diesel, got some other provisions and did my final checklist.

All of a sudden the colour of the sky changed. Deep red clouds rolled in and I realised I was in the midst of the thick dust storm. The wind was heavy and shook my vehicle. After a few sharp thunderbolts big drops tumbled out of the skies. Yes, it rained mud!

Later that night I learned that the storms dropped dust on the snowfields of eastern Victoria and NSW and coloured it pink!



Dust storm in Swan Hill. This picture was taken around 1.00pm

## Nhill and Kaniva

The districts of Nhill and Kaniva are towards the western border with South Australia, and somewhat south to the areas originally assigned to me. I decided to visit these districts because of the plea of the local vacant Presbyterian charge, which were thinking of cooperation with PIM to establish a patrol in that district with a shared ministry between themselves and PIM.



Canola field near Kaniva

I was surprised by the good-looking paddocks. The wheat looked very promising and the canola fields were breathtaking. The Wimmera river is dry, though.

On average the people were very friendly and welcomed me on the properties. There were some who were confused by our visit. Why would we visit while they have their own church just down the road, which they attend on a regular basis? This fact made me wonder about the feasibility of having a patrol in that area. I decided to limit my calls to properties on the

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<sup>1</sup> Feel free to copy or quote from this article.

northern border, just south of the Big Desert Wilderness (Wyperfeld) Park. I approached the area from the western border with South Australia.

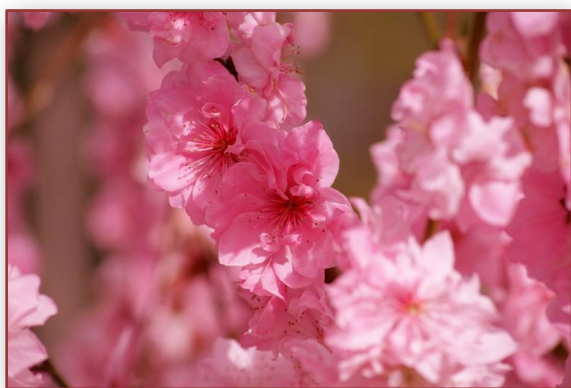


**The Alf Traeger Memorial.** With John Flynn he invented the “pedal radio” which transmitted many a message across the wide plains of the outback

encouragement. Although he assured me that there are Presbyterians in that region, I did not have the privilege of meeting any on patrol.

I also called at the office of WestPrint Maps (Nhill), in search for a good map. The result of the call is that I am now in the process of being accepted as chaplain to the members of the Country Fire Authority of the north-west Mallee, an area directly over what is already my normal patrol area. This is a door which has been opened to us for future ministry as we get to know the people.

The resilience and hope of the farmers are astounding. Wherever you go, people want to forget the past dry seasons and just want to



**Beautiful peach blossoms in one of the gardens**

somewhat forgotten. He invited me back.

Hardly anyone in that area had ever seen a patrol padre from the PIM, but as soon as one shows them the \$20.00 note with John Flynn’s face, the pedal radio of Alf Traeger, the camels and the flying machine of the Royal Flying Doctors, you’ve got their attention. I was very delighted to also visit and photograph the memorial of Alf Traeger born at Glenlee, north of Dimboola.

My visit to the home missionary, helping out in the vacant charge of Kaniva/Nhill, was a worthwhile stop. I was very friendly received and sent away with a prayer of blessing and



**Very sandy track in the Big Desert**

look forward to the next

better one. But unfortunately, once again this year is to some the 11th dry season in a row.

At one property, upon receiving my pamphlet and card, the friendly farmer informed me that he was unfortunately in a hurry. I asked if there was something I could do for him, he said that I could pray and ask God to do the right thing and send some rain. I patted him on the back, looked him straight in the eye and said, “God is always doing the right thing.” It was as if these words made an impact on him. We talked more and his haste was

My first experience with mulesing ended up with a shower of blood staining my brand new shirt and my 14 year old Akubra hat. Heila had ways of removing it, fortunately! The farmer maintained that I was now baptised into my job! Every property I visited after that knew where I was coming from!



Lake Hindmarsh, now dry. When filled up the tree in the foreground would be in the water and everything up to the horizon would be under water.

I returned through Rainbow, via Lake Hindmarsh – the biggest inland lake in Victoria (137,000 hectares!). How surprised was I to stumble across a very pretty church in the middle of nowhere. The Pella Lutheran Church (and now vacant manse) is right in the middle of a paddock. This church is still in use and I suppose its minister is living in Rainbow.

## Southern Mallee

The first part of the patrol was through the southern parts of the assigned areas in the Mallee. I did not visit many people, but those whom I visited really appreciated the calls.

My very first visit was to a property where the devastation of the drought was more than evident. These people had their 11th crop failure in a row. How do you talk to people who are experiencing one disappointment after the other! God prepared the way.



The Pella Lutheran Church



Forgotten glory

I pulled up, said a silent prayer and asked God's guidance. I was greeted on the front veranda. We sat down, enjoyed (!) the company of thousands of flies, and just talked. I explained to them that I have not come to hand out things; they didn't want it in any case. They just wanted to talk. I explained that we come from a very distinct Christian angle; they were happy with that. And we talked. There were some tears, some hopeless arms swung into the air. I could not fix their problems, and they did not expect it. No cuppa, nor pretence, nothing artificial; just raw emotions and pain – and laughs, and thankfulness

for the education the kids could enjoy in the good times and for the fact they are now in good jobs far away from the drought. Mom and Dad are just lonely, now left with nothing else but digging into their reserves, now almost depleted.



I prayed for them. They bowed and listened.

When I left the lady remarked, "It is good to know that someone is thinking of us. We really appreciate your visit."

Visits like this surely have their reward for being a patrol padre.

Next day: I turned off to the farmhouse. It looked as if there was no one home, and I dug into my literature box for the usual printed matter I leave on

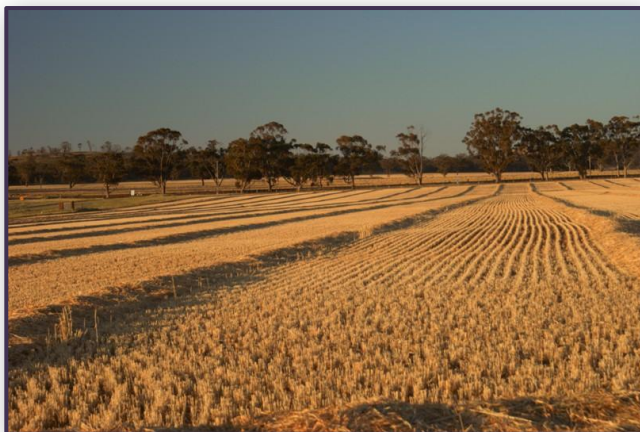
properties. The generator in the shed started and there appeared a man, leaning on a walking stick. I explained to him the reason for my visit. He invited me in and offered a cup of coffee. I accepted.

While the billy was brewing I noticed some Bibles and commentaries on his bookshelves. We started talking and I realised this lonely man, riddled with extreme arthritis, is a very tender child of God. He attends a very small bush church not too far away – that is, if the constant pain does not overcome him.

We talked about things of the Kingdom and prayed together.

I was worth the while visiting him.

I caught Billy on the hop. He said he had expected JW's when he saw me driving up the driveway, but the sign on my vehicle set him at ease. He was receptive for the Gospel and told me about his drinking days, his broken marriage, but how good Christian people looked after him and nurtured him in his faith. "I am still a long way off, Mate; but you come back



Harvested wheat paddocks

one day and we can talk. I like your style," he said.

I actually had no style; I was too occupied getting the flies out of my eyes and ears. But God must have done something to stir his heart. I am going back one day.

Next day: the bloke in the caravan park on his motorbike walked across and introduced himself. We struck a conversation and before long we were right in the Bible. He is a Christian, so he confesses, and I believe him. We agreed on many things and became friends in the Lord. Upon returning home, I



Sunset glory



Irrigated crop near Hillston

found an email message on my computer. I have made a new friend!

Next day: the lady opened the door and stepped outside. At first she was a bit apprehensive. I told her the purpose of my visit. She looked more hesitant. We waved flies and started talking. "If only my husband would talk. He is blaming himself for the drought!" If only I could be the shoulder to lean upon. I pray for this man, his family and his property. May God give him peace and hope and understanding!

### Mid-western southern New South Wales

The second part of our patrol took us to the mid-west and southern parts of NSW. After spending a night in Lake Cargelligo we headed south-west to make our way to Hillston. We criss-crossed the country, got to more

vacant homesteads than normal and after a long day booked ourselves into the caravan park in Hillston. We made contact with good friends from our stay in Warren (1994-2000), had tea with them and were very much encouraged by their fellowship and prayers for us.

We made good contact on a series of



Not much to be desired or to get excited about

properties the next day, but the visit to the elderly couple stands out. We were welcomed into their home like old friends. They offered a cuppa and we gladly accepted. Their simple, and yet rich lifestyle, is striking. They are content in the Lord, have nothing shining to show off with, apart from their childlike trust in the Lord who would



Another dust storm

provide in their needs.

Large tracts of land towards the south are nothing but bare and dusty. Nowhere have I seen the effect of the drought is in those parts. The farms are large – up to 30,000 acres – and in some cases people just deserted the homes and walked off. Others, closer to the life-giving waters of the Murrumbidgee river, live like nothing is happening. There are very sceptical about the



Too much or not enough water?

Gospel, and at best appear to be just polite.

### Prayer points

- Pray for God's grace to be shown on the farming community, firstly for them to understand that living in a relationship with Him is the most important aspect of living; secondly, to give them rain at the appointed time.
- Thank God for those folk who serve Him faithfully.
- Thank God for others who made us welcome and encouraged us through emails, telephone calls and just a cuppa.
- Ask God to open the eyes of those who are blinded by the blessing of water from still flowing rivers, who still don't see their spiritual need.
- Pray for wisdom to build up friendships of trust which lead to sharing the Gospel.
- Pray for God's grace to be shown on the farming community, firstly for them to understand that living in a relationship with Him is the most important aspect of living; secondly, to give them rain at the appointed time.
- Pray for the opening given us to serve as a chaplain of the CFA.

Your friends in the Lord,

Rudi and Heila Schwartz

[rschwartz@pim.org.au](mailto:rschwartz@pim.org.au)

[rhs@schwartzrecord.org.au](mailto:rhs@schwartzrecord.org.au)

[www.schwartzrecord.org.au](http://www.schwartzrecord.org.au)

[www.kerangpresbyterian.org.au](http://www.kerangpresbyterian.org.au)