

Far-flung flock

AS ANGLICAN BISHOP OF NORTH WEST AUSTRALIA, DAVID MULREADY'S DIOCESE IS AMONG THE LARGEST, AND MOST DIVERSE, IN THE WORLD.

BY JOHN DUNN

DAVID MULREADY pulls on his purple polo shirt, adjusts his Akubra and sets off to tend to his flock in the heat and red dirt. He's mustering, but not the Santa Gertudis and the Brahman and Black Angus cattle that abound on the vast stations of Australia's north and west, which is his beat. It's the people who live in this remote area that he's off to care for.

David is an Anglican clergyman and he is the bishop of North West Australia, responsible for the world's largest landed diocese. It extends from Dongara, not far north of Perth, up the coast to where the Timor Sea washes over the top of the Kimberley, and then east across the state to the borders of South Australia and the Northern Territory. It covers 5,180,000 square kilometres and occupies 25 percent of the continent, including some of the harshest, hottest and most testing country in this nation or anywhere else. Most of the people who live here reflect their tough environment.

David's parishioners farm cattle, mine iron ore, man the great ships that serve these mammoth industries, live in the Aboriginal communities, work in the tiny towns that provide for the population and operate the tourist centres that dot the Indian Ocean shores. This is a diocese more diverse than just about any other and one that obviously requires, of the principal cleric, relentless travel. In fact he and his wife Maureen, who assists in many aspects of his work – ranging from conducting bible studies and scripture reading to caring for the young and handling much office detail – are absent from their home base for half of every year as they maintain the necessary personal contact with ministers and keep in touch with disparate congregations.

For instance, from the bishop's base in Geraldton it is some 3000 kilometres to his furthest group at Oombulgurri on the faraway Forrest River beyond Wyndham. In between there are 15 parishes that cover places that are relatively large and well-known – such as Kununurra, Broome, Port Hedland and Carnarvon – and others that are small and tucked away, such as Telfer, Wiluna and Laverton.

The numbers of those who follow the Anglican faith in this area are not high, perhaps 1000 regulars in all, but that does not diminish David's dedication and the ministers who support him. Nor does it dampen neither the intensity of their work nor the breadth of their mission. "Just look at the map and you'll see how isolated some of our communities are," David says. "Christians living here need to grow under vibrant bible teaching. They crave fellowship with like-minded friends. There are plenty of opportunities for teaching, evangelism, fellowship and pastoral care here."

David has a rural background, which helped considerably when he took up his appointment in February 2004, and he had already spent time in other country dioceses. "We were extended in ways which just would not have happened in the city," he says. "We raised our three children in country towns and we believe that they are richer for the experience."

The Mulreadys were based for 15 years in the Armidale diocese in the north of New South Wales and from there served at rural centres including Tambar Springs, Walgett, Manilla and Gunnedah. That was followed by a period with the Bush Church Aid Society of Australia, an Anglican organisation that works in remote and regional Australia, before moving to Penrith in the western suburbs of Sydney. Later, while at Parramatta, where he was only the 11th minister since Samuel Marsden, the church decided David was the man to succeed Tony Nichols as the sixth bishop of its biggest and one of its most challenging areas.

It was a huge move – from one side of the country to the other, from the nation's most populous city to the sparsely populated western outback and to a place that was far removed from family. But the Mulreadys were not fazed. "It carried an element of excitement to serve God in this way but challenges can be scary and intimidating and I was conscious that there might well be a reaction against so-called wise men from the east," David says.

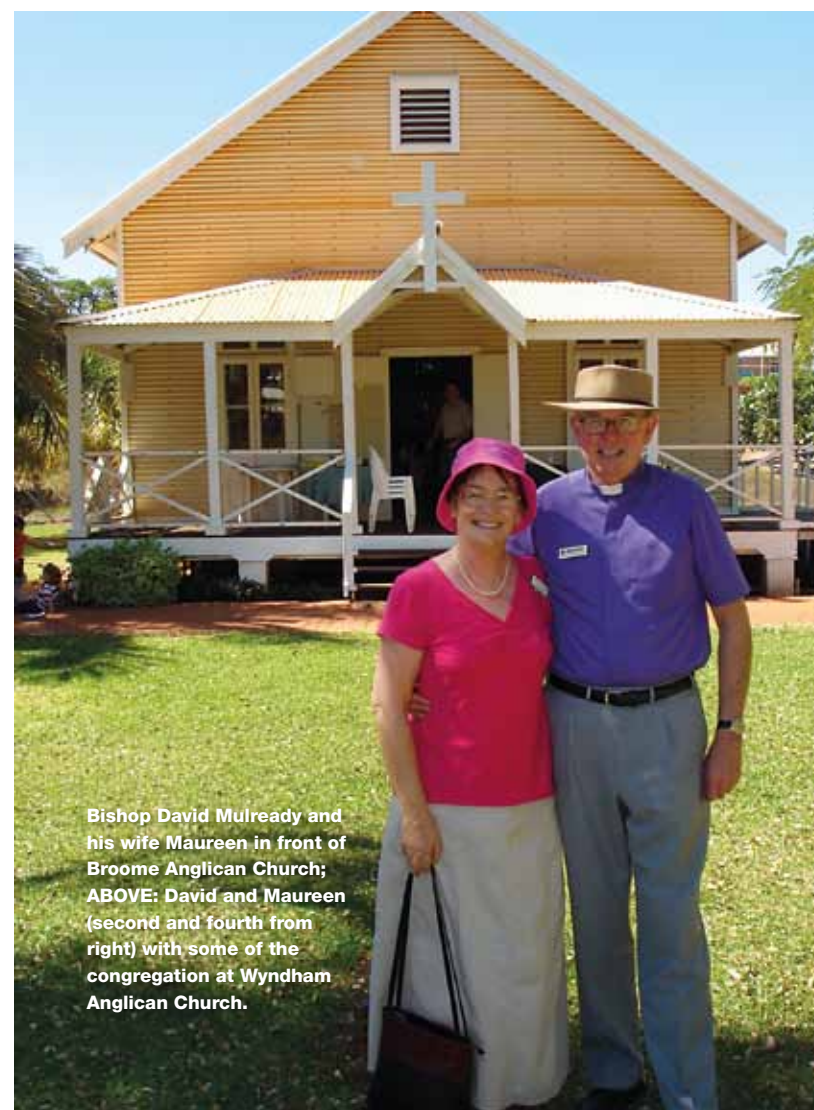
He even overcame a heart attack at the outset to begin administering his far-flung flock. He made it clear from the very beginning that he was well aware that his new diocese required a considerably different approach to his previous postings. "I tried to set the scene at my installation," he says. "I said, 'I would like you to call me David, not Bishop. I want to be treated as a person, not as the office of the person. I want all of us to be relaxed. I want the clergy to relate to me as a colleague, not as a boss, just as another clergyman.'"

The style in this part of Australia had to be different because this part of Australia is different. "Informality is needed here," David says. "This is an area where young people, adventurous people, dominate and to relate to them you must be on their wavelength. Our expression has to be low-key so I mostly dispensed with the robes and the bells and whistles but I have been careful not to lose the basic identity of the role. Regalia still has its place but I use it sparingly and only on specific occasions."

David's method is simply to reach out to people. "Some within our diocese have struggled in recent times with drought, some with a crisis in the cray industry," he says. "Now all of us are affected in one way or another with our personal finances. The proper response for the Christian in the midst of strife is to keep trusting God."

DIOCESAN CENTENARY

It's 100 years this year since Bishop Gerard Trower, an English clergyman serving in Central Africa, was installed in Carnarvon on July 4, 1910 as the first bishop of the Diocese of the North West, having previously been part of the Diocese of Perth. That milestone is being commemorated with special services and other functions throughout the region during 2010.



Bishop David Mulready and his wife Maureen in front of Broome Anglican Church; ABOVE: David and Maureen (second and fourth from right) with some of the congregation at Wyndham Anglican Church.

