

## About the McKay Patrol

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### What we do

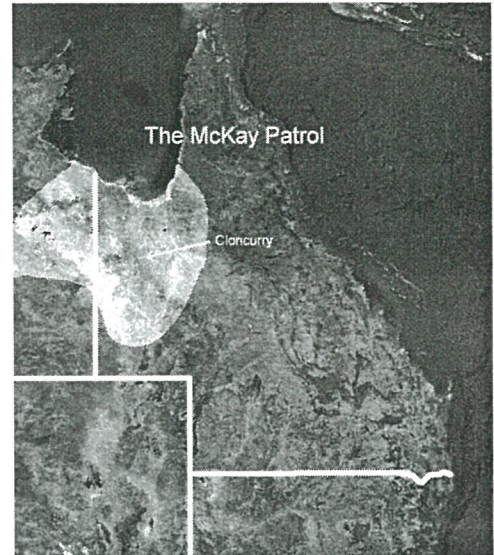
The McKay Patrol operates from Cloncurry in Northwest Queensland to service individuals and communities throughout this vast region, as well as providing pastoral, logistical and advocacy support when needed to these individuals, families and communities.

### Pastoral

Traditional activities such as baptisms, weddings and funerals are part of, but not the only part of this role. However, in addition to the obvious religious significance, such occasions provide invaluable social contact, and opportunities to deal with troubling issues. The minister is a person who these isolated people can trust to listen to their problems on a confidential basis, and provide constructive responses. The long history of commitment to the outback by the Uniting Church and its antecedent organisations has grown a level of trust within the people towards the Uniting Church Padre, who they know will treat them with respect, and from whom they will often get the advice and assistance necessary to resolve these problems

Counselling services which many take for granted in the larger communities are largely absent, or unavailable to many in the remotest areas of the country. Often this shortfall is taken up by the padre who can offer crisis counseling and/or referral and information regarding services available to these people. An example of this is where the padre has flown people with mental illness to Townsville for necessary treatment. In this instance the padre walks alongside the person and provides a sounding board to their concerns. These services are provided to all persons irrespective of their background and financial situation.

For the people of the North West, the arrival of the Patrol Padre has and still is a time to stop and have a cuppa. It's a time to be able to share their concerns with someone, who is not in the same boat, but sails the same ocean.



The McKay Patrol covers some 625,000km<sup>2</sup> of Queensland and the Northern Territory



Performing Christmas Carols for kids at Gregory Downs. Many families travel great distances to give their children the opportunities city kids take for granted.

## Advocacy

Because of his unique insight into the region's problems, and his acceptance by all as an "honest broker", the padre often finds himself representing disempowered persons with the likes of mining companies and government departments. For example, people are often brought down to major centres for medical treatment and upon discharge are left without the appropriate information or tools for recovery. The padre has been on hand to speak with the health department in finding ways of providing care to those who have felt left out of the system. In 2008, the padre brokered a deal between a mining company and a local station owner for the use of roads built by the mining company and the relocation of the station airstrip which had been swallowed up by the mine lease. The deal also restricted the operation of heavy mining equipment to no closer than 1km from the station house.

## Logistical

Despite the improvement in the road network, the vagaries of weather in the Northwest still necessitates that quite often communities, stations and people are isolated for months on end, where the only transport accessible is expensive air transport. Isolated families often call upon the padre to deliver much needed supplies or to fly in or fly out staff and family members.



Floods cause major disruptions to outback life and food drops are an essential part of the Padre's role

The floods in the gulf area following the floods in early 2009 meant that many stations ran short on much needed supplies. The Padre was, in these instances, able to provide emergency relief as well as providing a free service allowing people to leave their stations for short breaks away. In some instances, pharmaceuticals and other necessities could only be flown in and even in the dry months, the delivery of such items is absolutely essential to the provision of reasonable living standards.

The Uniting Church Patrol has also had a long relationship with the Mount Isa School of the Air, both in terms of a chaplaincy role, as well as being able to facilitate teacher-student meetings. In addition to attending and participating in mini-school gatherings and school activity days, the padre often flies teachers to remote stations where the children can get an opportunity to spend a day with their teacher. He also regularly transports children to and from their stations to meet bus or rail connections to or from boarding schools. He has also flown station people to meet connecting commercial flights for both medical and other urgent needs.

Whilst postal service and transport services exist in the outback, the padre is often called upon for urgent assistance which would not otherwise be available. Broken machinery, particularly in the middle of a muster or other crucial activities, can spell economic disaster and the timely delivery of parts has often averted such disasters.

### Other Services

There are many and varied other services provided which are too numerous to detail. A few examples are:

- Christmas Carol services and other community events in remote communities. The padre is often called upon to either co-ordinate or oversee some community events where others may be unskilled or unwilling to take on the task.
- Anzac Day services.
- Installation and maintenance of internal telephony, computer and electronic devices. Getting computer repairs done in remote stations often requires computers to be sent away for weeks. The padre is able to offer onsite maintenance on many of these instances. This has been a tradition of Uniting Church Padres. For instance, in the 1930's padres were trained in tooth extraction and often performed minor dental procedures in remote communities. The original RFDS pedal radios, designed by Alfred Traeger, were serviced by padres who were trained in radio theory and given spare parts to restore this important life-line. Recently, whilst traveling past one station, the padre was asked to look at a data line between two buildings that had failed. He quickly diagnosed that the cable had been chewed by a rat and left behind some wireless networking equipment that allowed the children affected to resume their classroom lessons. The equipment was donated to the family, as they were unable to afford it; but it is always felt, as it always has been, that the needs of the community must come first.

### Our financial problem

Because of the nature of the Ministry, it is necessary that a fully maintained aircraft supports the responsible Minister. The current aircraft is a Cessna 182. As you would be well aware, the operation and maintenance of an aircraft is an expensive proposition, particularly in remote areas where a safe and reliable aircraft is not just a luxury, but also a necessity. The operational conditions and the landing strips used are often less than ideal. These costs are exacerbated by the number of take-offs and landings, which in the last 12 months were 304. The aircraft flew 400 hours and flew some 102,000kms.

Currently, the Patrol Padre personally fund-raises around \$100,000 from individuals, congregations scattered all over Australia and Church groups including Ladies Fellowships and golfing groups. He also tries, where possible to conduct 'share-flight' operations in which others going on flights are encouraged to assist in covering the cost of the flight. All this money goes directly to the operating cost of the Patrol including all costs incurred in operating the aircraft, avgas, maintenance and insurance etc, the four

wheel drive and the office. Whilst these seems a large amount, the operating cost for the McKay Patrol is comparable to the operating costs for many Frontier Services patrols.

### **A voice in the wilderness**

The Uniting Church and its precedent Churches have a proud and long history of serving the whole of Australia. Often, we were the first to see the needs and to have the courage to tackle them with innovative and faithful exuberance.

While many other denominations have come and gone in outback ministry, the Uniting Church largely stands alone in continuing to provide these vital services to the outback. It should not be underestimated that if the McKay Patrol was to cease operation in the North West of this state that there would be no-one providing the support. This would mean 5 communities would be without any services of religion and the logistical support and counselling service provided by the Uniting Church would end. As one station owner said at the last review in 2008, "If not for the Patrol, there was no-one."

It is our firm belief that the McKay Patrol is an important element of a healthy and vibrant Church. Its connection to the QLD Synod reminds us that we, as a Church, think outside of our local areas and understand the diversity of this land and the true meaning of Christ's call to serve all people, no matter where they are and how hard that service may be.