

THE THEATRICAL BISHOP CARING FOR A FAR-FLUNG FLOCK IN THE OUTBACK



Tue 22 March 2016

This article by Tim Lee was originally published online by [ABC News](#) on Tues 22 March 2016.

In his first year as the Anglican Bishop of the Riverina, the Right Reverend Rob Gillion spent as much time in a car or aeroplane as he did in church.

It is a measure of the size of his diocese, which covers more than a third of New South Wales and is bigger than England, Scotland and Wales combined.

"About 65,000 kilometres I've travelled in a year visiting all the different parishes," said the 64-year-old Bishop.

"And you'd have thought at my age, for goodness' sake, I'd be exhausted — but it's invigorating, and I hope other people are inspired by the fact that I'm with them and I'm here for the long term."

Installed in late 2014, Bishop Gillion's Australian posting was a world away from his previous role as a rector in the hip, inner London suburb of Chelsea.

"It is a total swap in how you think about things," said the Bishop's wife Janine, who admitted she was initially a little lukewarm about moving to Australia.

"And here we are, we think nothing now of travelling up to Broken Hill; so eight-and-a-half hours or more. And you think, 'That's great'," she said.

"But you wouldn't be sitting in London and think, 'Oh, I'll just pop off to Scotland.' It's a whole different mindset."

From thespian to theologian

Dressed in clerical collar, black cassock, a magenta sash and wearing a prominent crucifix, the Right Reverend Gillion appears to be the archetypal Anglican bishop.

But when the house lights go down and the stage lights come on, the public sees another side to this enthusiastic Englishman.

Trained as a professional actor, Bishop Gillion trod the boards in a range of stage shows — everything from repertory to cabaret to Shakespeare. He worked as a mime artist and stand-up comedian and appeared in film and television productions.

At 32 he felt drawn to the priesthood, though he has never entirely left his previous career.

"I suppose as an actor I've been given communication skills, or trained in them," he said.

"Not that I'm going to use theatre when I preach, but I want to communicate the story that I think is really important about Jesus in the most powerful way."

In the lead-up to Christmas, Bishop Gillion — with Janine as production manager — toured his one-man show to Broken Hill in far western New South Wales and performed the play at other venues, including small towns closer to his base in Narrandera.

Churches should unite because 'we're all in this together'

Bishop Gillion said he believed the use of theatre could help the Anglican Church reconnect with its parishioners and be a means of including people who felt marginalised by the traditional Christian churches.

He and Janine plan to establish a youth theatre in the diocese and hope it can succeed like a venture in London, which teaches acting to street kids in some of the city's poorest suburbs.

Bishop Gillion made no bones about the challenges confronting the Anglican Church and most of the more traditional Christian denominations in Australia: declining attendance at services; ageing congregations; and a more secular society. Remote districts face the additional challenge of population decline.

"Some of the places in my vast diocese are declining in population, they're declining with industry, things are tough," Bishop Gillion said.

"We need to be there and we need to resource ministry in the places where it's a challenge and a struggle."

On that score the Bishop has a radical proposal.

"I think within the rural areas of the Riverina in Australia, the denominational churches — the Uniting Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Baptist Church and the Anglican Church and all the other churches — ought to join together and be united, because we're all in it together," he said.

Bishop Gillion's Riverina diocese includes some of Australia's most socially disadvantaged towns. Although his tenure as bishop will expire when he turns 70, he said he was ready for the rough and dusty roads and seemingly endless challenges that lie ahead, taking care of the people he described as his "far-flung flock".

"My job is to love my human flock. The drought will come and the locusts will come and all that, and yet they're still resilient and they carry on with what resources they have," he said.

"It's 42 degrees Celsius with dust coming up in your face, and behind you, the rough road. I want to do more of that, get out into the places where people don't get so often.

"It's a pretty challenging place to be, but it's a wonderful place. Otherwise I wouldn't be here."