



SANDPIPER

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Get to know Alana Brennan SMPC Member

Alana Brennan put her hand up for the SMPC for the very same reason she volunteered for her local Parish Pastoral Council: “I’d like to see people have the same enthusiasm for the Church that they display for their football Club,” she says.

“My main concern is that we aren’t seeing young people or families at Mass or participating in parish life. How do we make Church relevant to these young people? How do we bring the Spirit back into their lives?” asks Alana.

“I was down at Marvel Stadium with a friend who is a mad Collingwood supporter. The enthusiasm and camaraderie were amazing; they don’t know one another but they talked, and laughed ...”

Alana, who has lived in Tongala since 1979, has witnessed the positive impact of sport, especially in rural communities. “In small towns people rally around the football and netball. I know there are people who aren’t interested in sport but, generally, it brings communities together, creates feelings of belonging, especially for kids, and gives a sense of mutual purpose and camaraderie.”

Alana says Tongala prides itself on having a very family-oriented Football and Netball Club with strong teams competing in the Murray League. Unfortunately, Tongala’s Catholic Church, St Patrick’s, is not buzzing with the same vibe.

Mass at St Patrick’s Tongala is celebrated on the first Sunday of the month with an aged and ageing congregation, which Alana says does not reflect the profile of the town. Tongala is well located, and the population is slowly increasing. “St Patrick’s Primary School is growing in numbers — a tribute to the dedicated staff,” says Alana. “The staff and kids do a brilliant job at school Masses but, come the

weekend, we don't see these young people or their parents at Church," says Alana, wondering if sport can also be a detractor.

"When I look back and think of Tongala in 1979, when we first came here, our little church was packed on a Sunday, now Mass is only once a month – it's really very sad and I don't know the answer to it."

"I'm concerned the next two generations won't engage with the Church at all," says Alana, explaining why she volunteered for the Kyabram Parish Pastoral Council.

Alana says the Sandhurst Assembly held in Kialla in February 2023 was the first time she had engaged with people from other parishes, and it motivated her to submit an expression of interest for the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council (SMPC). "I came away from that Assembly knowing that there are other people with a fervour to do something for the Church, wanting to get things going, wanting our parishes to be vibrant," she says.

Now, as a member of the SMPC, Alana aspires to implement diocesan-wide programs to engage with people from all walks of life. She is part of the group focusing on *"a strategic direction for the Diocese relating to the missionary and pastoral outreach to families, young people, marginalised groups, and those who are baptised but no longer active in parish life."*

For Alana, engagement is about making people feel comfortable; enabling a sense of belonging to a community and empowering people to participate. "We don't want to be spectators in our own lives. If you listen to Pope Francis talk about synodality, it's about people putting their hand up and participating. That's part of our mission, to go out and engage with people and empower them to participate," says Alana, suggesting the Church is starting to make roads in this area.

Alana provides several examples of initiatives implemented by Kyabram parish with the hope such programs can, with the help of the Diocese, be further developed and packaged as tool-kits for parishes to try. These include welcoming non-Catholics and non-practising Catholics to regular 'no pressure' 'non-judgemental' social gatherings in places outside of parish grounds.

Alana is well qualified to talk about outreach and engagement initiatives, drawing from deep experience at the coalface of community resilience projects over many years.

Alana is a mother of five, grandmother of thirteen and a widow. She has worked as a dairy farmer and primary school teacher, and her experiences teaching literacy and numeracy skills to adult factory workers and working in drought relief have deepened her understanding of the human condition.

Alana says she believes in 'going to where the people are' and 'asking people what they want'. "A key pillar of community development is that things must come from the ground up, not top down." When she was working as Drought Officer for the Shire of Campaspe, Alana and her social worker colleagues embarked on a program of 'Farmgate Cold Calling'. Despite a lack of support from a state government department, which was of the view that they would be invading people's privacy and could be endangering themselves, the Campaspe Shire's program proceeded, and Alana says she believes they saved lives.

"A pair of us would rock up at a persons' farm, usually with our boot full of groceries and Vinnie's stuff — we'd introduce ourselves, 'How are you going?' ... People would answer, 'I'm ok', but then, as we started talking to them, they would break down. They weren't ok. We would then assist by connecting them with services to get the help they needed, and often this included medical attention."

Six years of working in drought relief, and being a dairy farmer during the drought herself, taught Alana the hard way, that people won't always reach out for help. "It was heartbreaking; people were walking around as if in a daze, stunned by it all. They didn't want to let their guard down, didn't want others to think they weren't coping. Most insightfully when we offered help to people, they would often respond 'give that to someone who needs it more than me!'," says Alana. "So, we'd give them groceries with no song and dance."

As an advocate for rural Australians and a parish volunteer, Alana says she keeps the advice of an old friend close to her heart. When you think you know how the other half live, think again. "Working with Centrelink, teaching adults to read so they could get work, really opened my mind," says Alana. This compounded with the learnings from working closely with farming families who were suffering from the effects of drought; seeing the loneliness and vulnerability of short-term agricultural and meat processing workers and the way they thrive when asked to Read at Mass for example, are all experiences which have placed Alana well to contribute to the mission of the Sandhurst Mission and Pastoral Council.

It's ironic to think that Alana thought she would never be chosen as a member for the SMPC, yet she put in an application and "Left it to God."

And God spoke, knowing that all the qualified and intellectual people in the Diocese, who Alana thought would fill the SMPC, know only too well that Alana brings with her gifts capable of truly making sustainable change — "making something happen".