

Christ Church South Yarra in the 1970s

Journal and Letters of the Rev'd Evan Wetherell
(11th Vicar of CCSY, 1970-82)

selected and arranged by Rodney Wetherell

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Dear Family,

Here is a rundown on yesterday, leaving out bits and pieces, to let you know how my time is spent. 7 a.m. H.C., followed by Matins. 9 took the service for our own school. Funeral that took me until 11.30. Fawkner Crematorium, a good way off. 11.50 confirmation class at Christ Church Grammar. Then to a Rural Deanery chapter meeting at 2. Then at Melbourne Grammar for Council meeting. Then a visit to a parishioner's flat on the way home. Then at 5.45 Evensong, then a visit to another parishioner. Then a wedding couple at 8, and a start on tomorrow's address for the American Remembrance service. So you see I am not idle all day.

I will bring this to a halt and have some tea.

Love to you all,

Dad

RW: There's one answer to the question 'What do the clergy actually do all day?' That was a paragraph from a letter written by my father Evan Wetherell on 19th April 1970, only a couple of months after his induction as Vicar of Christ Church. He was used to a very busy life in two previous parishes, St. Andrew's South Brisbane and St. Peter's Cathedral, Armidale, but Christ Church presented some unique challenges. He recorded all manner of events and observations on parish life, both in letters to his three children, David, Elizabeth and myself, and in a journal he kept. I have been the custodian of this journal since he died in 1989, and typed out earlier entries for family distribution, but I had not even read the entries for the 70s and Christ Church till last year. First of all, how did he come to be at Christ Church, when he was barely known in Melbourne Diocese? Here's an excerpt from his journal entry on Monday 17th November 1969:

Letter today from the Registrar of the Diocese of Melbourne to say that I had been nominated as Vicar of Christ Church South Yarra.

I had a hunch this would happen. When I was in Sydney not long ago for General Synod, I noticed that the Melbourne representatives were looking at me in a fixed sort of way, and that Mrs. Woods, the wife of the Archbishop, was plainly following me around the room with her eyes at the Mowll Village reception. It was as though she had asked someone to point me out, and then gave me what she thought was a surreptitious look. I even wondered on the spot whether I would be offered South Yarra, since I knew there would be a vacancy when David Shand left. No longer in its prime, Christ Church is one of the best-known parish churches in Australia, and has produced more than its fair share of bishops, for example the Bishops of Newcastle and Riverina.

Something tells me I will accept. This is the first time since I came to Armidale that I have felt even tepidly interested either in hints or definite offers that have come my way. This has something of a challenge in it, and this is probably the last opportunity I will have of taking a worthwhile parish because my age will be against me if I delay much longer. Then there is the matter of the number nine. Nine years at CEGS (the school known as Churchie, East Brisbane), nine years at South Brisbane, and if I leave Armidale now, nine years here. I know if I go now, that I will miss very much so many parts of my work here, particularly among students and the young.

RW: A letter from Archbishop Frank Woods is placed among the pages here, dated 14th November.

The Very Reverend E.W. Wetherell
Dean of Armidale.

My dear Dean,

The parochial nominators for the parish of Christ Church, South Yarra, wish me to offer you the incumbency of that parish and I therefore write accordingly to do so. I have no idea whether you would feel free to accept this invitation. Please be assured that if you would like to come to Melbourne to look at the parish and to talk to me about it, your expenses would most certainly be defrayed.

Yours sincerely,
+Frank Melbourne

RW: A whole two weeks later, Dad replies.

Your Grace,

As indicated in my wire to you today, I accept the incumbency of the parish of Christ Church, South Yarra. It has been a difficult decision to make, but I feel sure now that I am meant to come. I did appreciate all you said about the parish. It really was a help.

RW: Another letter from the Archbishop concludes:

We much look forward to your coming to us. I hope I made it plain to you that you are not coming to an easy job, but I still believe that it could be a rewarding one. Please let me know when you will be moving. My wife and I would gladly give you all accommodation for a few nights if you need it.

RW: Nothing survives from the next couple of months – possibly not much was written, in a very busy period. My father wrote this in a letter to the family dated 8th March, 1970.

The last weekend in Armidale was terribly busy. It was amazing that we ever got away. On the way down, the heat was appalling. It was the kind of burning heat that dries up the throat, and we found it impossible to quench our thirst. Stopped at every café on the way, to no avail. The unpacking was terrible. The vans could not be brought near the house, and everything had to be carried a long way across the schoolyard. We carried and unpacked things all day. Very hot still, nicely warming up to the Sunday, which was to be a little touch of hell. (Since then it has been pleasant.) The Friday night was the Induction, followed by supper. The Governor Sir Rohan Delacombe made the speech of welcome, and came to the Vicarage between the service and the welcome. He turned out to be very easy. He and David got on famously, because he is very interested in Papua New Guinea.

His ADC Bill Becke wore a monocle, but I have seen him a lot since, and he is a very nice fellow, in spite of it. The Archbishop was at his best. Very good command of words.

There is a tradition here that the number of times the incoming Vicar rings the bell during the Induction service will be the number of years he will stay in the parish. (Apparently this has proved correct over and over, even to David Shand, who rang it three times.) The bell is very big, and takes a knack to ring it at all. During the afternoon I had tried my hand at it, and at first could get no sound at all. With some practice I managed to get several rings from it, but in case it went silent again during the actual service that night, I had asked John Sawkins the verger and the three Wardens, to take over if necessary and ring it for me. But my fears were groundless. I took a good swing at it, and it started to ring. The Wardens counted the strokes, and John whispered 'Ring it twenty times, Father.' I think I rang it twelve times, and everyone seemed satisfied.

RW: My father was Vicar here for exactly twelve years.

The house is a delight, and is becoming more like home every day. It is 110 years old with extremely thick walls. Wonderful place for big groups. Fortunately it is down the hill from the traffic. This is one of the busiest parts of Melbourne, especially this corner, but we hardly hear a sound.

RW: When I typed out all the passages about Christ Church, they came to 72 pages, which would take over four hours to read out. I have made some copies of these, by the way, but for this talk I have made selections and arranged the material in themes, beginning with that very important subject for this parish, music. Prominent here is Leonard Fullard, long-time organist and choirmaster, and founder of the Bach Festival.

A month since we reached Melbourne. Seems more like a year. For the first time today I felt as though I belonged. I think the music at the 11 service clinched it for me. It was the anthem 'Greater love hath no man' by John Ireland that did it. It was beautifully done, and following the organ recital last Sunday, I can see that the music is going to be of high quality.

23 Aug. 1970

One of the best things about life at Christ Church is the music – but it is the music that gives Vicars here their greatest concern. Our choirmaster Leonard Fullard, one of the best organists in Australia, is not a strong disciplinarian, and over the years the choir has developed bad habits, like sneaking out while the sermon is being preached – the men, I mean – coming late for services, and talking freely during the services. I set my face against all this from the start, even though I knew that habits deeply ingrained like these can never be put to rights overnight. One of the men said to me 'We have been doing these things for twenty years'. I think Mr. Fullard is in fear and trembling that I will lose his men from the choir, after all the time it has taken him to build it, and I can understand his anxiety. So far it hasn't happened, and the discipline is certainly a lot better. With my fanatical attention to punctuality, they all know that I won't wait for anyone, and gradually they are turning up on time. There is now far less talking than there used to be, and going out during the sermon is now the exception rather than the rule. They know that this will be followed up every time. Secretly I feel every sympathy with them, and try to play my part by ensuring that the sermons are always short, never more than ten minutes, and both Des the curate and I try to make them as interesting as we possibly can.

4 Sept. 1970

I will be glad when this Bach Festival is over, mainly because Mr Fullard is such a perfectionist and he gets all worked up when big things are on. I have to give a sermon on Bach, on one of the major occasions, and I could easily say the wrong thing. Mr Fullard is the Australian authority on Bach, and I wish he would give the sermon himself. The Festival lasts for more than two weeks, not continuously of course. It is a tremendous undertaking, and I am expecting Mr. Fullard to be a wreck by the time it is over.

RW: We now skip three years, and I see among the journal pages a letter from Dad to the Premier of Victoria, Mr. Hamer, recommending Leonard Fullard be recognized by the Queen. On 2nd January 1974 he wrote in his journal:

Our organist, Mr. Fullard, is now MBE. This was announced in the Queen's New Year Honours. Some time ago I wrote a letter to the Premier about it, enclosing letters from Archbishop Woods and Sir Edmund Herring stating that they would support the recommendation. For twenty-four years he has organised a Bach Festival in our church. This is now a recognised feature of the musical life of Melbourne, and is still attracting large numbers.

Mr Fullard is a genius when it comes to training boys' voices. He takes them when they can scarcely sing in tune, much less read music, and six months afterwards they are capable of singing anthems and choral settings in that pure tone he is capable of producing par excellence. It is all done with great patience and by insisting that they do not strain their voices on any single note. A carefully selected series of exercises, sung over and over again before they sing, seems to be the secret.

Mr Fullard is not always an easy man to work with. He is explosive and has a sharp tongue which he can use with devastating effect. He seldom gives praise – especially to boys, who would give him far more than they do if he enthused over their singing, which is sometimes very fine. He is a first rate musician, and well deserving of his recent honour.

3 Oct. 1974

I am having some strenuous days with the Bach Festival in full flight and the fair. Mr. Fullard is more or less a cot case, and without his capacity for rising up when you think he will fall down, I doubt if he will be able to see the Bach thing through. I went to see him last Friday. He was in bed and obviously pretty sick, but that night he was here for a practice, and he had a most successful day on Sunday, with a Navy service thrown in for good measure at 11. Mum and David are both in the choir, and it really was good, as was the orchestra. This is the 25th Festival, and I used this as the punch line when I wrote to the Premier about an honour for Mr. Fullard, and it did the trick. When the MBE was announced, this was the main thing mentioned.

22 June 1975

Our new choir is first class, and a vast relief from the belligerent one we had when we first came. True, they sang well, but the price was heavy. Our choir now – men, women and boys – are well behaved and co-operative. It has taken five years to do it, much longer than the Archbishop had in mind when he told me on my first night in the parish that I would have to get rid of the choir if I wanted any peace.

One problem was to persuade Mr. Fullard that having women in Christ Church choir was not as unthinkable as he imagined. I did this by means of suggestions over a period, and in the end he came to it himself.

RW: I have called this next section 'Outreach'. My father was very conscious that Christ Church with its lovely bluestone church, splendid music and fine services, did not penetrate much into the lives of the local residents, many living in blocks of flats. He introduced several new things – for example he asked pop singer Colleen Hewett to sing at services, and he arranged some sermon-discussions. Here's a journal entry from 23rd March 1972:

At night we had a sermon-discussion on the theme 'Our duty to rebel'. George Martin, Chaplain of Prahran Technical College, opened up the subject in masterly fashion, and then it became rather like a meeting, with me more or less in the chair, and the subject was thrashed out, with the people joining in very easily and ably. I am trying to do things differently, in the hope that this church will cater for a wider field. It will be a gamble, and I could lose more than we gain, but it is a chance I must take. Christ Church has always been one of the traditional churches in Melbourne, one that has run consistently on well-trodden lines, but I can sense that those lines are not in the stream of things today. This area is full of flats and in them few families, and almost no children. Calls from the clergy may be seen as intrusions, and the clergy as busybodies trying to press them into involvement when they do not welcome it. Some of them come occasionally to services but they do not want to be pressed beyond that point. In America a good deal of work has been done in areas like ours, and the reports of this have not been encouraging.

A few of us who have this situation to live with are meeting every fortnight to try to work out some strategy, and gradually we are seeing a clearer picture. We can see that the methods that work in ordinary parishes won't work in ours, and that new approaches are needed. This is to be the subject of our next sermon-discussion: 'The Church and the Flat'.

RW: In mid-1975 the parish agreed to a TV documentary being made about it for the ABC Religious Department. The producer was David Pope, a priest himself but working in the media at that time, and disaffected with the Church. The approach was to be critical, as the parish accepted, but people waited for the broadcast with some anxiety.

18 September 1975

I have heard that the documentary on Christ Church will be broadcast on November 9th, perhaps at 9 p.m. It will be worth seeing in colour, if you know anyone with a colour set. They set out to prove that this was a beautiful church in a beautiful suburb, with governors, millionaires, and social lions gracing its pews, and this is how it will turn out. We will be shown as turning a blind and rather supercilious eye on the poor and the neglected, and the social outcasts on the wrong side of Toorak Road. From the things that they refused to photograph, I know that is how it will be shown. The church will look its best, the people their most glamorous, and between us and the community there will be a great gulf fixed. This will be the theme, and there is a big gap, of course. A veil will be drawn over such things as my work as an industrial chaplain, or at the Prahran Technical School, and there will be no reference to the two nights a week we give over to Alcoholics Anonymous and their children. I tried hard to get them to include such things, but somehow they never did. Strangely enough, they did take us doing the paper collection for the Brotherhood.

Many of our people are deeply concerned about the community, and are not the uppity, snooty lot they are made out to be by people who don't come here now, or who perhaps never did. It will be a pity if the documentary helps to keep alive a reputation that has been only a fable for a good many years.

27 October 1975

Dear Family,

I have now seen the program ahead of broadcast, and am now becoming daily resigned to having a crooked image of the parish spread all over Australia. It was not so much bad as lop-sided.

18 Dec. 1975

So many letters and calls about the TV documentary on Christ Church. Opinion is decidedly mixed. On the whole people enjoyed it as a spectacle. Amazing how many saw it – from all over the place. I went to see the woman in the program who said no-one would want her here. She still had in her mind the picture of the parish as it might have been forty years ago. Said she would like to come to a service, and had already arranged this before I saw her.

RW: Whatever the truth about Christ Church itself, social differences were probably more obvious in South Yarra of the 70s than they are today – it was not all gentrified by any means. My father was quite accustomed to wealthy people, but not to the concentration of them he discovered in this area. Right through his journal and letters there is a minor strand of commentary on the ways of the upper crust.

16 May 1970

An invitation has just come in for us to go to an 8.30 affair at Government House in June, but it says 'white tie, or uniform and decorations'. Since I possess neither a white tie nor a uniform and decorations, I feel tempted to slide out of it in some diplomatic fashion, but Mum thinks it would be a pity not to go. Don't feel like spending ten dollars for the night on hiring a suit. We like the Governor and Lady Delacombe and quite enjoyed our last venture into the vice-regal circle, so you may find me there suitably clad after all.

30 May 1970

This is certainly a place of contrasts. This morning I went into the flower vestry, and spoke to a woman doing the flowers. She was about as elegant as is possible to be. Dressed beautifully, right amount of jewellery, nothing overdone but plainly plain, but very good – you know the line. She was witty, cultured, nice deep tones, and all that, and she could take her place anywhere.

Then I walked to the markets. Different world this. No elegant women here. But they seemed a good-tempered lot, and made way for one another as they pushed their shopping buggies along. On the way home I went into a funny little shop near the markets. Woman serving hadn't a tooth in her head, and she wouldn't have had an invitation to Government House, but she did call me 'dear', and asked how I would manage to get home with all my parcels. No two women could have been more different if they had tried. And they sum up the two social parts of my life now. Not much in between. I like them both, but it takes a bit of adjusting to.

4 November 1971

Mum and I had a very South Yarra-ish evening the other night when we were invited for dinner to the house of a very wealthy woman. She is really very nice, but she does things in such style that one could be put off by it. All 18th century furniture and silver. Two maids waited on the table. Interesting company. Ex-Ambassador to Rome, Alfred Stirling and his sister, then among other guests the Hobill Coles whom we like very much. Mrs. C is one of the most genuinely charming people I have met. Mr. C is an expert on silver, and is very well up in prints as well. All done Victorian style. Ladies leaving at the end of the meal for the men to drink brandy or port. The conversation was interesting the whole evening, but not in the least strained.

RW: The next section I have called Crime, of which Dad reports many incidents, one of which affected my mother's health and wellbeing for a long time. The first one is a might-have-been – the church might have been reduced to ashes.

14 April 1971

Dear All,

We had our share of excitement last night. There was a Vestry meeting, and a man rushed down to say that there was a fire in the church. By the time I got there the fire brigade was on the way, having been summoned by Mr. Fullard, who rushed over the road and pushed his elbow through one of those fire alarms. This worked wonders, and in two minutes they were on the job. The church was full of smoke and a curtain in the choir vestry was on fire. Burnt paper underneath showed that it had been deliberately done. However, no real damage was done, but we were extremely lucky. I had locked the building after Evensong about 6. Mr. Fullard came in after 7 and gave a few lessons on the organ, leaving the door open that faces the school. After his lessons at about 9 he went back to the choir vestry, and suddenly saw that the curtains in front of the choir robes had caught on fire. It must have been smouldering for a while and suddenly caught alight. I had visions of all the floor going up in flames, then the organ, and then all the woodwork around the altars. I wouldn't have minded the screen going up, but this would not have gone alone. If Mr. Fullard had gone home instead of going downstairs, it would have been too late before the fire was noticed. Only hope they don't come back and set the Vicarage alight while we are away, but have asked Des Lowe the curate to lurk about at night and to keep different lights burning every night after he has gone home.

RW: In mid-1971 there the family car was damaged in several different incidents, and also stolen at one stage, but it turned up in Hampton – and there were a few minor burglaries. The fact that the Vicarage gave straight on to Fawkner Park made it irresistible.

The most serious incident happened in 1976.

On Monday Mum was attacked by a young man, who gripped her round the throat, broke her glasses and knocked her down. After she had got up, she got rid of him eventually by giving him money, and he ran off about fifteen minutes later. Apart from bruises, a sore back and twisted arms, she is physically none the worse, but still shaken and nervy. Fortunately she kept her head and very courageously kept talking to him until he calmed down, and this saved her from further attack. We thought at first that he had suddenly gone mad, and I am not sure that he isn't round the bend, but the police tell us that he is dangerous, more bad than mad.

We were both able to identify him from photographs, and we know now that he is one Jimmy Foley. So far he hasn't been caught.

This fellow came here on Friday asking for work. Said he had come from Adelaide and was waiting for his social benefit cheque, and hungry. I found work for him, and told him we could find some more on Monday. He turned up and worked well for nearly two hours. I gave him four dollars fifty, and suggested he might come back on Wednesday. All that afternoon I went to the hospital and did some other visiting. Usually I come back to the Vicarage before Evensong, but this time I went straight to the church at 5.40. Towards the middle of the service Mum staggered in and told me that she had been attacked. Foley had come to the Vicarage at about 5.15, asking for me. Mum said that I would be in soon. She was about to come inside when he followed her in, and then rushed at her. Then came the assault. (This was in the study.) Mum didn't lose her head at all, and when he asked for money, she gave him all she could lay her hands on – about twenty dollars – and he ran off. Mum then came up to the church.

We rang the Prahran police, and soon two policemen were here, taking it all down. Then two detectives came, and it all had to be taken down again. Next morning yet another arrival, then another, and a police woman. Then Dr. Bush, the police doctor – a parishioner – and he examined Mum for broken bones (her shoulder was very sore). Tonight he came again at my request, and to cap it off, two more detectives came late this afternoon taking everything down once again. This is THE statement, and they will bring it back for her to sign.

Mum has been very good all through, and was able to get the meal last night. We are making sure she isn't left on her own for a while, and will keep all doors well and truly locked and barred, and she won't answer the door without knowing who is on the other side of it. I feel sure that Foley is well out of the way by now. It could have been far worse, if Mum hadn't controlled his violence by keeping as calm as she did. We both know this trick, and I have used it on many occasions.

This isn't much of a letter, but it is the best I can do now.

Love
Dad

RW: There are many other subjects I'd like to have included in this selection: the parish fair, for example, one of the biggest in Melbourne; dinners and breakfasts, a youth group, the newspaper collection, comments on politics and church affairs, pen portraits of various bishops and clergy, and of course weddings – much humour there. We have made some copies of all of my father's surviving account of Christ Church life, which will be available at the door, at a cost of \$10, to go to Missions.

I was living in Sydney in the first half of the 70s, and was surprised when a friend showed me a tabloid newspaper with a big photo of Dad in it, on P3 I think. 'Your father has behaved like a hero,' he said. The Melbourne papers had it on the front page, with a rather lurid story attached. This was the only time in Dad's ministry when his picture was on the front page, I'm sure. It was all about a mentally disturbed woman who had got up on to a petrol storage tank in BP Port Melbourne and started firing a gun at all and sundry. Someone had counted about 100 bullets fired, though no-one had been hit thus far. Dad worked one morning a week as Industrial Chaplain at this installation, but was not there when the crisis began. He was called in, and took Mum with him, leaving her in the car outside the place. In consultation with the police inside a building, he went out into the open, wearing his clerical collar, and talked to the girl through a loud hailer.

I was a sitting duck at this stage, but I knew I had to go on. For some time now I had the feeling that she might throw herself over the railing and I felt I had to make contact with her, to prevent something like this, or another burst of shooting, during which she herself might get shot. I heard later that she had said that she wanted to be shot. One way to get herself shot was to shoot me first. I am glad this possibility did not occur to me during that walk. It was bad enough as it was. I stood at the foot of the tank and held up the can of lemonade (this to keep her thoughts away from guns). I walked up the stairs for about half the distance when I had my worst moment. I had heard some kind of movement at the top of the tank and thought 'she's coming down'. But so far so good. (I should add there wasn't a sound from anywhere all this time. The atmosphere was very tense, and there was a stillness that I could feel.) Then suddenly I knew she had retreated back to the top. Later I heard that she had looked down and seen the police moving in. If I had thought of it, I would have asked them to keep well out of sight, but it didn't enter my head that they would do it. She rushed back to the top, and started shouting at them. I thought that she had gone back for her gun, having become suddenly panicky. I shouted out to her through the hailer. 'Margot, where are you? I'm coming up.' To my great relief, I knew that I had made contact with her. I kept on climbing and suddenly we met, about a quarter from the top of the ladder. She was pretty, very flushed, with brilliant eyes. Before we actually met, she called out 'I won't hurt you'. 'I know you won't' I called back. (I knew nothing of the sort, really, but at that moment I believed her.) It was too late to believe anything else, anyway. Her first question was 'Are you a policeman?' I replied 'Do I look like a policeman?', and she seemed satisfied.

RW: After talking to her for some time, Dad came down the stairs, intending to go back later, but meanwhile a police inspector took over, and persuaded the girl to throw down her rifle, her stash of bullets, and her knife. Then they both came down, and Dad joined them for a final talk before she was taken away. I have no record of the subsequent court case, but I do have lots of cuttings from Feb. 27th 1975. Dad's account of the BP episode ends with this paragraph, and I think it makes a nice ending for this presentation too.

Since the Sunday before it all happened there had been a series of coincidences, and these I will talk about later, when I can bring myself to talk more about it. But this I must say. I felt throughout the afternoon a strong sense of guidance; it was as though I was being used by a force outside myself. I don't think I made a single mistake in what I said to the girl, or in the things I did, or in the timing of events. This is not the first time that I have had danger thrust on me, but I hope it will be the last. Enough is enough.