The Troublesome Priest

“The intentional dehumanisation of refugees damages us”
- Father Rod Bower
Introduction

This is the inspiring story of Father Rod Bower, the controversial Anglican Priest from the Central Coast of New South Wales, famous for his church signs that go viral around the world via social media.

Guide Outline:

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Father Rod Bower is an Anglican priest who uses the sign out the front of his church to provoke debate about challenging social and political issues.

Working as a team with his wife Kerry, they share their contentious and often humorous messages via the Anglican Parish of Gosford Facebook page.

Public interest extends far beyond Father Bower’s parish on the NSW Central Coast; he has over 46,000 Facebook followers including people of all different faiths and people of no faith at all. The page receives up to 14 million engagements each week and he consistently attracts both national and international media coverage.

Father Rod believes Australia’s treatment of asylum seekers has put the soul of the nation in peril; that as we diminish the humanity of others, we are diminishing our own humanity. Although inspired by the life of Jesus of Nazareth, Father Rod’s motivations cannot be understood purely in religious terms. Filmed over 2 years, The Troublesome Priest delves below the public facade to reveal the makings of this complex yet simple man who is driven to take a ‘hard line on compassion’ to create the Kingdom of God on Earth.

An adopted child who was relentlessly bullied due to his small stature, Father Rod remembers the rage he felt, not for the physical pain or humiliation, but for the injustice of the abusive acts. The rage still bubbles away just below the surface when he witnesses attacks on the vulnerable such as the denial of human rights for asylum seekers due to tough government policies or the racist slurs towards the Muslim community from anti-Islamic groups like those who invaded his church one Sunday morning.

Sometimes failing to contain his temper Father Rod lashes out against the ‘bullies’, fighting hate with hate, becoming what he despises. He struggles to resolve the traumas of his past and follow Jesus’ example of fighting hate with love.

Once an ambitious and defiant young priest, Father Rod was unceremoniously fired from his Archdeacon position 14 years ago when he ignored a directive from senior clergy. It meant the end of his ecclesiastical career, which completely devastated Father Rod and sent him into a depressed and suicidal state for over a year. With the support of his wife Kerry, Father Rod eventually let his ego or false-self die allowing him to be reborn as a priest. This is what he believes the death and resurrection narrative is all about. Existing on the fringe of the church institution, Father Rod is now free to be a voice for the voiceless and to speak truth to power. However, it’s not an easy road as he is shunned by many within the church, is the target of hateful trolls on social media and frequently receives chilling death threats.

Father Rod says that the opposite of love is fear and it is fear of ‘the other’ that leads human beings to harm one another. As the world struggles with the omnipresent threat of terrorism and our fear of ‘the other’ gains momentum, Father Rod’s quest for a more evolved humanity has never been so critical.
The Troublesome Priest

is the inspiring story of a flawed yet courageous man who seeks to heal his own brokenness so he might heal the brokenness of our collective humanity.

Curriculum Relevance

The Troublesome Priest would be suitable for middle and senior secondary students in a number of curriculum areas.

However, like Father Bower himself, it is difficult to pigeonhole the film in terms of school curricula. It is an accessible and lively biopic of a unique Australian cleric, illustrating how his Christian beliefs propel a social and political agenda designed to raise awareness within the broader Australian community.

At an obvious level, it would be very worthwhile for students studying subjects such as Religion and Society at VCE/HSC level – the role of a religious leader in twenty-first century Australia and the links between politics, religion and society. What does it mean to be regarded as ‘troublesome’ within a religious institution?

In VCE Religion and Society Unit 3, Outcome 3 involves discussion and analysis of the interplay between religious beliefs and their expression through related aspects and significant life experiences.

One of the suggested learning activities is:

- To undertake a detailed study of a significant life experience of a particular member of a religious tradition or denomination: investigate the interplay between religious belief and the significant life experience and present a report or case study.

In HSC Society and Culture, Stage 6, students study the nature of belief systems and ideologies. These studies are designed to develop an understanding of the nature of belief systems and ideologies through a close study of a belief system or ideology that demonstrates a set of values and beliefs and its relationship to the wider society and culture.

A COMPASSIONATE NATION STARTS WITH ME

The practice of Father Rod Bower is underpinned by his understanding of the ethical framework of Christianity as both a belief system and an ideology that must engage with the ethical and political issues within society to express Christian principles. Part of this focus study includes exploring the following areas:

- The role of important people and power structures
- The role and impact of dissent
- The nature and impact of change and resistance to change
- The impact of technologies and globalisation on continuity and change

See:
Page 43 for an extended explanation of this focus study.

However, the film’s appeal and relevance is even broader, as attested by Father Rod Bower’s large Facebook following and media presence. The Troublesome Priest deals with issues of Civics and Citizenship and Values and Ethics. It shows how one person can make a difference as an individual prepared and able to speak out against government and politicians and the social attitudes that entrench many policies. Father Rod acts and speaks his mind in ways that are unexpected and, for some people, not part of a priest’s role.
For students of **Film and Media Arts**, this documentary offers an example of how the way in which a short film is structured and edited can reflect the complexities and contradictions of its subject, in this case, Father Rod Bower. While the film includes scenes of Rod and his wife Kerry speaking to camera, it also contextualises the Bowers within their public and private worlds in a number of settings.

How do you make a biopic that is not essentially “talking heads”? The key visual of Father Bower’s highly visible noticeboards are a recurring motif throughout the film and these visible signs encapsulate and make public many of Father Rod’s beliefs.

In the National Curriculum Year 9 and 10 Media Arts, students are encouraged to:

- Plan and design media artworks for a range of purposes that challenge the expectations of specific audiences by particular use of production processes (ACAMAM076)

**Philosophy and Values and Ethics** – exploring the influences on individuals who choose to devote their life’s work to creating public awareness of injustices by using the media to promote their views. Is it appropriate for a parish priest to be a social critic, to be active in public protests and to espouse views that many people may disagree with?
‘Will no one rid me of this troublesome priest?’ This quote is often attributed to King Henry II of England. Thomas Becket was characterised by England’s King Henry II as a troublesome priest. He was Archbishop of Canterbury between 1162 and 1170 when he was murdered. He refused to give the king power over the church. He was canonised and immortalised in T.S. Eliot’s play, Murder in the Cathedral.

There are many so-called troublesome priests who have not been prepared to accept all of the Christian Church’s authority, whether Anglican, Roman Catholic or ministers in other Christian denominations. The term ‘meddlesome’ has gone out of popular use since the sexual abuse scandals involving members of many different religious faiths and organisations. To be a priest is no longer automatically respected, given the acknowledged criminal behaviour of many clergy investigated by Royal Commissions in Australia and many other countries.

Martin Luther, a German theologian and priest (1483 – 1546), challenged the power and authority of the established Church and was an important figure in the Protestant Reformation.

Many other priests and religious teachers have found themselves in trouble with church leaders for speaking out about social, political, moral and theological issues, for not conforming to the established Church’s protocols; in a word for being outspoken, for drawing attention to what they see as un-Christian behaviour by politicians and church leaders, in particular, for standing up for the powerless and marginalised.

In Melbourne, Father Bob Maguire has, at various times during his working life as a parish priest in South Melbourne, been in disagreement with the Catholic hierarchy and often outspoken in his views about the injustices in Australian society and how the established church has often failed to respond with compassion.

In Sydney, Jesuit priest and lawyer Father Frank Brennan is another priest who engages in public debates and issues. He has been an outspoken supporter of Indigenous Australians’ call for land rights. In 2016, he was appointed CEO of Catholic Social Services Australia where he is a leading voice for the voiceless.

In the twenty-first century there are a declining number of individuals studying to become priests across all Christian denominations, whether in the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church or any of the other Protestant denominations. Individuals such as Father Bob Maguire and Father Rod Bower reach out to their communities through social media as much as through the more traditional ways within the church of ministering to a congregation. They are able to use the media to promote their views and their pulpit becomes any place where their voice can be heard. Such transparency in the public arena possibly protects them from the fate of earlier troublesome priests.

Father Rod’s parish of Gosford is located within the Newcastle Diocese of the Anglican Church. He has enjoyed the support of Newcastle Bishop Greg Thompson for some three years, however Bishop Greg resigned March 2017. Only time will tell if Father Rod continues to have the support he needs to continue his work.
2. The Sermon on the Mount

The Sermon on the Mount is the longest piece of teaching from Jesus found in the New Testament, and occupies chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the Gospel of Matthew. The Sermon is one of the most widely quoted elements of the Gospels. It includes some of the best-known teachings of Jesus, such as the Beatitudes (blessings) and the Lord’s Prayer.

To most believers in Jesus, the Sermon on the Mount contains the central tenets of Christian discipleship.

The last verse of chapter 5 is considered by some to be a focal point which summarises the teaching of the sermon: be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect, advising his disciples and followers to seek the path towards perfection and the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Sermon on the Mount encapsulates what many people, including Father Rod Bower, regard as the fundamentals of Christian teaching.

The Beatitudes from the gospel of Matthew 5:3–12 during the Sermon on the Mount.

➤ Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.
➤ Blessed are those who mourn: for they will be comforted.
➤ Blessed are the meek: for they will inherit the earth.
➤ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness: for they will be filled.
➤ Blessed are the merciful: for they will be shown mercy.
➤ Blessed are the pure in heart: for they will see God.
➤ Blessed are the peacemakers: for they will be called children of God.
➤ Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

In 2016, Pope Francis proposed these modern beatitudes during his visit to Sweden

➤ Blessed are those who remain faithful while enduring evils inflicted on them by others and forgive them from their heart.
➤ Blessed are those who look into the eyes of the abandoned and marginalised and show them their closeness.
➤ Blessed are those who see God in every person and strive to make others also discover him.
➤ Blessed are those who protect and care for our common home.
➤ Blessed are those who renounce their own comfort in order to help others.
➤ Blessed are those who pray and work for full communion between Christians.

It is these Christian precepts that are at the heart of Father Rod Bower’s work and worship. It should be noted that many other religions also express the need for humility, justice, compassion for the poor and vulnerable and respect for the natural world.

PAULINE, HOW ABOUT LUNCH
Glossary

Gosford
Is a city located on the Central Coast of New South Wales, Australia, about 76 km north of the Sydney central business district. It has a population of 180,000.

The Anglican Church
Is sometimes referred to as The Church of England, though the term Anglican has been the official name in Australia since 1981.

King Henry VIII started the process of creating the Church of England after his split with the Pope in the 1530s. Henry was anxious to ensure a male heir after his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, had borne him only a daughter. The king wanted his marriage annulled in order to remarry. In 1534 after several attempts to persuade the Pope to grant an annulment, Henry passed the Act of Succession and then the Act of Supremacy. These recognised that the King was the only supreme head of the Church of England called Anglicana Ecclesia. Henry adopted the title given to him by the Pope in 1521, that of Defender of the Faith and the reigning British monarch remains the head of the Anglican Church.

Taken from the BBC site listed below.
Read about the Church of England at:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/christianity/cofe/cofe_1.shtml

Structure and processes of the Anglican Church in Australia
There are differences in titles and in the way members of the clergy are addressed between different Christian denominations.

Deacon
In Catholic, Anglican, and Orthodox Churches, a deacon is an ordained minister of an order ranking below that of priest. Father Rod was also a deacon.

Parish priest
Minister of a parish, sometimes called Father or Reverend or Pastor or Rector. The parish priest often lives in a rectory near the church where there is also an office. The duties of a parish priest involve holding religious services, conducting weddings, baptisms and funerals and assisting members of the parish with their many and diverse needs.

Archdeacon
A member of the clergy within the Anglican Church who is appointed to assist the bishop in certain administrative and pastoral duties in a diocese. Father Rod Bower is the current Archdeacon of the Central Coast region of the Newcastle Diocese. An archdeacon may have responsibility for a district comprising a group of parishes, and the archdeacon may represent the bishop at church meetings in that district (the district is usually called an ‘Archdeaconry’). Despite the name, there is now no direct connection with the order of deacon, and an archdeacon is generally one of the priests of a diocese with additional broader responsibilities than those of a parish priest. Not all Christian denominations have archdeacons.

Bishop
Religious leader responsible for a diocese, a group of parishes.

Archbishop
Has overall responsibility for all parishes in his state.

Collation
The legal process by which a priest becomes an Archdeacon.

The Burqa
Father Rod, like many religious leaders supports the freedom of other religions to practice their faith peacefully and without harassment.

One of the signs outside Father Rod’s Gosford church says ‘Bless the burqa’ in response to calls from some members of society to ‘Ban the burqa’, garments worn by some Muslim women.

• What kind of garment is a burqa and for what reasons do some Muslim women choose to wear it?
• What is the difference between a burqa, a hijab and a niqab?
You may find the explanations and images on the listed website useful in clarifying your understanding:

Research countries where the wearing of these garments is banned in the workplace?
Are you aware of any other religious groups where some adherents choose to wear clothing such as headgear or other visible identifying symbols?
Why do you think the wearing of the burqa has become such a controversial issue in many Western societies, including France and Australia?
Who is Father Rod Bower?

The Venerable Rod Bower is an Anglican priest, Rector of Gosford, where he has served for 18 years and Archdeacon of the Central Coast. He is an ambassador for the Refugee Council of Australia and Chairman of the Board of Lakes Grammar, an Anglican School.

Father Rod is a passionate advocate for a number of social justice and human rights issues, including marriage equality. He believes that our treatment of Asylum Seekers, the lack of action on climate change and the failure to adequately recognise First Nations people damages our corporate soul.

It has been said he takes ‘a hard line on compassion’, he is committed to building social and cultural capital and contributing to the evolution of an Australia where there is respect, peace and harmony. Father Rod is married to Kerry, also a passionate advocate for Asylum Seekers; they have two married children and three grandchildren.

Father Rod received the 2016 Doha International Award for Interfaith Dialogue and was recently named Abyssinian of the year by the Muslim Community.

This film tells the story of Father Rod Bower and how he expresses his Christian beliefs in ways that are sometimes unconventional and even unpopular with those who do not see a Parish priest as someone who should express views some may see as ‘political’. Others may see his work as integral to the message of love and compassion that is at the heart of the life of Jesus Christ.

Table 1 on page 10 of this guide could be used by students as they watch the film to make notes about each of the different elements of the film. Altogether they create a narrative snapshot of the man and his convictions.

Following this Table are a number of key quotes from the film that contextualise Father Bower’s convictions and beliefs and reveal how his beliefs about Christianity inform his actions as an activist leader. You will also find several of his noticeboard signs throughout the guide.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>KEY SCENES</th>
<th>WHAT HAPPENS OR IS REVEALED THROUGH IMAGES AND EXPRESSED IDEAS</th>
<th>WHAT THIS SCENE SHOWS US ABOUT ROD BOWER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Putting up signs on Parish noticeboard outside Christchurch Anglican Church at Gosford.</td>
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<td>Silent vigil at a meeting of a political group.</td>
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<td>Use of social media.</td>
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<td>Reflecting on his earlier life.</td>
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<td>Significance of 2001 when Father Rod lost his position as Archdeacon of the Central Coast.</td>
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<td>Identity*</td>
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<td>Dealing with people opposed to his views, particularly anti-Muslim extremists.</td>
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<td>The ‘fake Muslims’ church incident at Gosford.</td>
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<td>Father Rod’s speech to those opposed to Australia’s current refugee policy in 2015 – ‘Lighting the Dark’.</td>
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<td>Reflections on ‘keeping on’.</td>
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**Key scene in this documentary for close study**

Time coded 9.03 – 11.00 - Identity

This sequence concerns Rod Bower's explanation and understanding of how his early life as an adopted child has influenced his essential character and sense of identity.

- What does Father Rod reveal about the nature of his childhood?
- How are his memories brought to life by the photos backgrounding what he says?
- In what ways does he believe he didn’t quite fit?
- What attracted him initially to the priesthood?
- What was the process that led him to developing a sense of identity and purpose?

**Words and Actions**

I voice some of people’s concerns.

How can I not be political? I need to engage the suffering of the world.

Fear is the opposite of love.

I hate bullies. I was bullied as a child.

You cannot be a disciple of Jesus Christ unless you are willing to engage the injustices of the world.

I don’t enjoy the social fellowship side of church as much as the sacramental side of what I do in church...I find it a deeply moving and connective thing within that gathering of people.

I’m more interested in promoting ideas than in building relationships.

Why do you always have to buck the system... and put yourself in danger – Father Rod’s mother to her son.

**Putting it out there**

Some of the messages Father Rod puts on the Parish noticeboard outside his Gosford church have gone viral on the internet and both delighted and annoyed many people.

- What do these very visible signs reveal about Father Rod’s views about society?
- What are some of the other ways in which he uses media platforms to encourage people to debate political and social issues?
- How do his actions and commitment to fairness for all people inform his life?
- How does this documentary show Father Rod dealing with some of the negative responses and even abuse and trolling that his public stances on many social and political issues attract, e.g. How does he respond to the caller who claims that seeing a veiled woman driving a car caused them to have an accident and fall off their bike?

**Key Themes**

- The role of a parish priest and the complex demands of this job
- Using a public position as a means of raising political awareness
- Social justice - becoming an effective spokesperson for politically unpopular views
- Refugees and other marginalised people
- Community activism
- The role played by religious leaders in a secular society

- How do the opening shots of Father Rod establish some of the key themes in the film? What expectations do these opening scenes set up about this documentary?

Both Father Rod Bower and his wife Kerry describe themselves as ‘introverts’.

Introvert comes from Latin intro - ‘inward’, and vertere - ‘turning’. It describes a person who tends to turn inward mentally. Introverts sometimes avoid large groups of people, feeling more energised by time alone. The opposite of an introvert is an extrovert, who finds energy in interactions with others.

- Is it possible to be a person with a public profile if you are essentially introverted?
- What are Father Rod’s preferred parts of his job as a parish priest?
- How does he use social media such as Twitter and Facebook to connect with people who are not regular churchgoers or even practising Christians? What kind of distance can utilising social media offer self-declared introverts like Father Rod and his wife Kerry? How does their Facebook page greatly extend their sphere of influence?
The Filmmakers

Key Creatives

Kaye Harrison is an independent documentary filmmaker who explores difficult topics in an engaging and illuminating way.

Working mostly as an observational Director of Photography (DOP) / director, Kaye develops strong relationships of trust with her participants and this translates into a powerful intimacy in her films. Her vision is to represent her subjects with integrity and compassion so that their stories might open the hearts and minds of the audience. Kaye was director/DOP of the award-winning documentaries Crossing the Line (2005) and The Long Goodbye (2010). Her acclaimed feature documentary The Sunnyboy (2013) premiered at the Vivid/Sydney Film Festival and had a successful cinema release around the country. Kaye has recently completed The Troublesome Priest for ABC TV’s Compass series, and is currently in production on the documentary feature film Sanctuary.

Documentary directors like Kaye Harrison tend to also do much of the hands-on work, in terms of filming, sound recording, writing and editing.

- What might the advantages be, apart from the cost-saving, in keeping the production crew small?

Read Kaye Harrison’s statement to understand some of the challenges and rewards of this two-year project.
The Director’s Statement about making this film

I first came across Father Rod Bower when I heard him speaking on my local radio station. He was being asked about a range of highly politicised issues including the plight of asylum seekers in this country. I was struck by how he cut through the political discourse by framing the issue in purely humanitarian terms. He was very eloquent but not in a pretentious way and he was humorous and full of hope. His quest for a more compassionate society resonated with me and I saw an opportunity to contribute to the public debate about asylum seekers. I set out to make a documentary that would engage all Australians regardless of their political stance.

I had expected him to be a very outgoing and deliberately provocative character but that is not the case at all. I found him to be a very laid back, thoughtful and socially awkward man who is sincerely committed to creating the Kingdom of God on Earth. Once I began filming with him I realised his personal story was so intriguing and an effective vehicle to engage a broad audience on some very complex and challenging issues.

Rod was extremely generous with his time allowing me to record many interviews with him covering all sorts of topics. He shared his life story with me, which was at times painful and he allowed me to follow him and Kerry to numerous events, protests and services. He always respected my agency as a person and showed complete faith in the spirit of the process from start to finish - an absolute gift for a filmmaker.

– Kaye Harrison
Extension activities

Select at least two of these 6 activities/sets of questions and research tasks for discussion and writing.

1. Write a 400-word profile of Father Rod Bower, using the information provided in this documentary and any other information you can find online about his life’s work. Devise a simple title for your profile that is different to The Troublesome Priest.

2. Devise a set of questions you would like to put to Father Bower about his approach to his job, either through his Facebook page or any other medium.

3. Construct a promotional piece to be shown on television in the days before The Troublesome Priest goes to air. What aspects of the program will you feature and what tagline will you use to accompany the chosen visual clips?

4. How do you become an ordained minister or priest in the Anglican Church in Australia? Investigate what you need to do to become a priest in the Anglican Church and find out some of the work and study requirements for priests.

Only explore Australian websites for answers to these questions as the Anglican Church is run under different rules in different countries, and in Australia, there are some differences between states. Here are some questions you should be able to answer when you have completed your investigation.

- What qualifications do you need, i.e. do you need a university degree, work experience in a related field such as social work or teaching or legal work or community work?
- How long do you train to become an ordained priest?
- How do you gain admission to courses of study for aspiring priests?
- Can women become priests? What about LGBTI individuals?
- Can you marry or divorce as a practising priest?

5. Conduct a class discussion about the need for people to be engaged in political debates and ethical issues in many walks of life.

In a secular society, whose job is it to call out the perceived wrongs perpetrated by many politicians of various parties?

How can bi-partisan responses to our treatment of asylum seekers be kept in the public consciousness?

What role can journalists and the media play in keeping citizens aware of injustices, unfairness and inequities in society?

What can you do?

6. In what ways has watching this documentary engaged you in understanding the work of an Anglican priest? Were there any aspects of the film that surprised you?

How typical do you think Father Bower is as a priest?

Does his commitment to social justice help keep debates about asylum seekers and marriage equality alive or is he essentially preaching to a minority who already support his strong stance?

Further Reading and Resources

- Newspaper article from 2014 detailing Rod Bower’s career within the Anglican Church

- A 2016 article about Father Rod Bower

- Father Bower’s Facebook page
  https://www.facebook.com/anggos/

- Facebook page about the film
  https://www.facebook.com/troublesomepriest/

- Read about the process and educational requirements for an individual aspiring to become a priest in the Anglican Church of Australia

- In Bob We Trust, 2013 documentary directed by Lyn-Maree Milburn about Father Bob Maguire, another troublesome priest who used the media as much as the pulpit to promote his causes and beliefs. An ATOM study guide is available to accompany this documentary.

- Transcript of an ABC television Compass program profiling Father Frank Brennan
  http://www.abc.net.au/compass/s1177467.htm
The Troublesome Priest is a Bunya Treehouse production in association with Screen Australia, Screen NSW and ABC.

This study guide was produced by ATOM. (© ATOM 2017) ISBN: 978-1-76061-074-6 editor@atom.org.au

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