

Robert Henry Saunders 22/March/1931 – 8/April/2006

Robert Henry Saunders was born on 22 March 1931 at the Banoda Private Hospital in Carlton, in the southern suburbs of Sydney. He was the first child and only son of Richard and Mary Saunders.

With the Great Depression at its depth, these were hard times. Dick Saunders could not find work in Sydney, and when Bob was only an infant, the family moved to Wickham, Newcastle, to live with Mary's parents. Eventually the family moved to East Lambton, where Bob's much-loved sister Barbara was born, and then to Birmingham Gardens where they built their own home.

Bob was educated at East Lambton Public School and Newcastle Technical High School. He left school after obtaining his intermediate certificate and became an apprentice carpenter at Lysaghts in Newcastle. Bob put his trade skills to good use, building a new room on the family home at Birmingham Gardens, and with his father, building the garage.

Dick Saunders was a Corps Superintendent in the St John Ambulance. Bob also joined the organisation, attending many sporting events in this capacity.

He was also a keen participant in sport, particularly cricket, although he also played soccer and basketball. Bob was always proud of the fact that while he was a student at Leigh College, he won the annual walking race. Years later Bob's children would hold walking races with their Bob, trying to imitate his "wiggly walk", but they never could beat him.

During his late teens Bob's involvement in the Methodist Church deepened, and he became a local preacher and youth leader. It was during this time that he cemented a life-long friendship with a fellow local preacher, Bill Smith, who now lives in Canada.

After his apprenticeship Bob began working for Bill Stronach, a Newcastle builder. It was about this time that he felt the call to enter the ministry. Having accepted this call, Bob undertook what was for him many difficult years of study towards ordination. To begin with, he had to study to matriculate, and although he did not find this easy, he applied himself with great diligence and determination. He would even study during his lunchtime, attracting the taunts of many of his co-workers.

Having successfully matriculated, Bob was accepted as a candidate for the ministry, and in 1958 was sent for a pre-collegiate year to Cessnock, where he worked with the Rev. Armand Whitehead.

There followed three years in Leigh Theological College. Early in his time at college, Bob met Phyllis Walker when he came to the Strathfield parsonage to enquire about the circuit cricket club. Some time later, four years later in fact, being a very proper young man, Bob called and asked her father if the way was clear to ask Phyllis out. My

grandfather said there was someone else in the picture. Bob said: "Well, I'm going to ask her out anyway and she can decide."

Ten months later, my grandfather, Reverend Edmund Walker, assisted by his brother, Reverend Frank Trafford Walker, married the couple in the Gordon Methodist Church on 21 September 1963.

This began 43 years of a close and happy marriage. As Phyllis says, they were always best friends. My brother Richard feels mention should be made of Bob's devotion to Phyllis during her long stay in Randwick Hospital undergoing treatment for cancer, and the difficult months of chemotherapy that followed.

It is an indication of this closeness that last Friday night in Gosford Hospital when the doctor asked Bob if he could write a sentence, he put down a few words, passed them to the doctor, and said: "Give this to my wife; the words are for her." They were the first lines of an old song: "We are in love with you, my heart and I". These were the last words he ever wrote.

Following his time at Leigh College, Bob had two years of probationary ministry in the Epping Circuit. He was ordained at Parramatta on 13 October 1963. The Bible used for the readings today is the Ordination Bible Bob was given that day.

Bob's first appointment as an ordained minister was to Weston in the Hunter Valley. During their time at Weston, the first three children, Geoffrey, Richard and Elizabeth were all born.

In January 1968 the family embarked on a great adventure, sailing to Canada, where Bob was to take up a three-year ministry with the United Church of Canada. Our home was to be the village of Tribune, in Saskatchewan. Here they made many firm friends with whom the family remains in frequent contact. Bob bought a small caravan, which he customised with extra cupboards and bunks for the two boys. The family spent many months of enjoyable travel in both Canada and the United States. Towards the end of their time in Canada Bob worked for several weeks on the farm of Fred Groshong, one of the many friends they had made. Helping with the major job of harvesting the wheat was an experience he always treasured.

The family returned to Australia a year earlier than planned following the sudden death of Bob's father Dick. Bob briefly returned to his trade while waiting to take up his next ministry at Lithgow. It was here that the youngest daughter Margaret was born in 1970. Following on from the experiences in Canada, the family bought another caravan, and for years enjoyed many more holidays, often in company with Phyllis's parents Freda and Edmund Walker, her brother Edmund, his wife Elizabeth and their children Michael, Helen and Peter. They also spent many happy summer holidays with Bob's mother Mary Saunders, his sister Barbara, her husband David and their children Heather and David, at Belmont on Lake Macquarie.

In 1975 the family moved to Mullumbimby on the far North Coast of NSW, where they remained for eight very enjoyable years. At the inauguration of the Uniting Church, Bob became Secretary and then Chairman of the Far North Coast Presbytery.

In 1983 they moved to the Broken Bay Parish, and during their time here the family got to know so many of the people who are here today. While living at Umina Bob purchased a small fishing dinghy, and with Geoff and Richard undertook frequent fishing trips on the nearby waterways. Bob had always been an enthusiastic fisherman, an interest he no doubt picked up from his father, Dick. However, he always lamented the fact that the results seldom lived up to expectation, and fishing trips usually ended with very modest catches. On one occasion, however, while they were fishing near the Rip Bridge, Bob caught the fish of his life, a flathead of impressive size. He was so proud of the catch that he insisted on keeping it in the freezer far longer than was advisable, so he could show it off to visitors. When he finally consented to its being cooked it was clearly past its 'use-by date'.

It was also during their time at Broken Bay that Bob and Phyllis bought their retirement home at MacMaster's Beach.

Bob's final ministry was in the beautiful Camden Haven parish. The parish grew strongly under his leadership, and extensions and renovations were carried out on the church and hall at Laurieton. Perhaps due to his background in the building industry, this had become a feature of Bob's ministry, with new or renovated buildings at Weston, Lithgow, Mullumbimby, Brunswick Heads as well as Laurieton.

Bob was always interested in people and his ministry centred on his pastoral work, his love and concern for those in his care. He was kind, conscientious and diligent to a fault, and always tried to do his best in anything he undertook. At the centre of his life was Bob's love for and steadfast faith in his Lord Jesus Christ, which never wavered to the end.

To quote from an article that appeared in the Camden Haven Courier to mark Bob's retirement: "The faith that Reverend Bob has preached and lived over the years has been from the heart, as he so obviously believes in the Christian gospel of God's good news to all folk."

After retiring from the ministry in 1996, Phyllis and Bob settled in MacMaster's Beach. In retirement Bob remained very active, undertaking hospital and pastoral visits and conducting occasional services. But there was more time for other interests, and the garden at their MacMaster's Beach home was soon burgeoning with flowers and vegetables and his beloved bromeliads. Bob and Phyllis also enjoyed many long walks on the beach and swimming in the tidal pool. Their social life was busy, filled with visits to and from family and friends, and church life in the Broken Bay Parish.

There was also time for travel, with trips to Norfolk Island with Bob's sister Barbara and to New Zealand with Phyllis' brother Edmund and his wife Elizabeth, and visiting family and friends on the North Coast of NSW and in Queensland.

It was a happy time for all our family. Bob presided at the weddings of Richard to Catherine, Margaret to Robin and myself to Cathy.

The last few years were filled with special joy for Bob and Phyllis, as they welcomed the arrival of three grandchildren, Rory and Cordelia to Margaret and Robin, and most recently Eric to Cathy and Geoffrey.

Last year Margaret and Robin moved to Edinburgh to spend time with Robin's family. In September Bob and Phyllis undertook the trip to Scotland, breaking the journey with a visit to Richard's wife Catherine's parents, Bryan and Joyce Porter in San Francisco.

Family life meant a great deal to Bob. He was devoted to his children, his daughters-in-law Catherine and Cathy, and son-in-law Robin. And as many can testify here today, he was the world's proudest granddad. Bob particularly enjoyed Christmases and other family get-togethers, where he entertained us all with corny jokes, and loved to show captive audiences around his garden.

Bob died peacefully in Gosford Hospital on Saturday last in the presence of those he loved and those who loved him. We will always miss him, and our lives can never be the same. But we have been richly blessed in knowing and being close to him.

Well-done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord.