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Tears, fears for the 'Kakadu of the south'

FORGOTTEN RIVER

AN OUTBACK TRAGEDY

Back in the summer of 2018-19 Graeme McCrabb was among the Menindee locals whose anger and heartbreak flashed around the country and the globe when majestic 70-year-old Murray cod and a million other fish floated to the surface of the Darling River dead or gasping for life.

The water may be flowing now, but he fears a repeat unless rules governing the river change.

"As much as I don't make the rules, we're going to be a generation that leaves the river in a worse state than what we found

it," McCrabb tells podcast host Tom Melville in the first episode of Forgotten River.

"I don't think there's anyone who can be proud of that, is there?"

Whether you are directly involved or indirectly involved we'll still be remembered as that generation, won't we?"

Graeme McCrabb on the banks of the Darling at Menindee. Inset: social media footage of locals in the river holding dead Murray cod after the fish kills of 2018-19. Picture: Dion Georgopoulos



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SHOCK FIRE

'Suspicious' blaze destroys Jehovah's Witnesses Kingdom Hall

FIRE

BY RACHEL CHAMBERLAIN

"THERE wasn't much we could do to save it."

That was the comment from Raglan Fire Brigade captain Gareth Sutton, who was among the first on the scene of a fire at the Kingdom

Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Raglan place of worship, on the corner of the Great Western Highway and Napoleon Street, was totally destroyed by fire in the early hours of Saturday morning.

Emergency services were alerted to the fire at around 3am, with the Kelso Fire and

Rescue NSW brigade the first on the scene, followed shortly after by the Raglan Rural Fire Service (RFS).

Personnel from Bathurst Fire and Rescue also attended, along with the Bathurst, Eglinton and Glanmire-Walang RFS crews.

There were reports of

flames as high as five metres above roof height and, according to Mr Sutton, there was no hope of saving the building.

"When we got there we found that the building was fully engulfed on arrival, so we started just cooling it before we did some interior

attack, and that continued until about 5.30am and then we went into the clean-up stage," he said.

"... There wasn't much we could do to save it."

Firefighters remained on the scene until the early afternoon to ensure the site was safe.

NSW Ambulance and NSW Police also attended the incident.

Officers from Chifley Police District are continuing to investigate the circumstances that led to the fire, however the early indication is that it was no accident.

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Call goes out for witnesses following fire

[From page 1]

"It is suspicious. It appears to be deliberately lit at this stage," Inspector Paul McCann said on Saturday.

Police established a crime scene on Saturday, with Bathurst detectives on site to investigate the blaze. They received assistance from Fire and Rescue NSW investigators and detection dogs, and the RFS investigators.

On Sunday, Inspector McCann was still unable to say what caused the devastating fire, but said it was still being treated as suspicious and investigations are continuing.

He confirmed that police are in talks with "several" witnesses as part of that investigation and again called for anyone with information about the fire to get in contact with police.

"If anyone hears of anything or saw anyone around that time, you can contact

Bathurst Police or Crime Stoppers," he said.

Police can be reached on 6332 8699, or call Crime Stoppers on 1800 333 000.

The local Jehovah's Witnesses congregation hasn't used the kingdom hall for a while due to the pandemic, instead meeting via Zoom.

NSW Jehovah's Witnesses spokesperson Stephen Nicholson said the congregation was saddened by the incident on Saturday.

"I'm pretty sure whoever did it wouldn't have thought they were endangering any life, they just wanted to damage property and be a nuisance of a severe kind," he said.

"It just saddens us that someone would go that far."

Mr Nicholson said they are waiting on the outcome of the police investigation and expect it will be weeks before they can start planning the next steps.



ON THE SCENE: Members of the Raglan Rural Fire Service extinguishing smoldering embers at the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses on Saturday. Photos: CHRIS SEAROOK 091821cjehovah6a



INVESTIGATION: A police forensic officer investigating what remained of the place of worship after Saturday's devastating fire. 091821cjehovah8a



EVIDENCE: A Fire and Rescue NSW investigation unit officer inspecting and taking photos of the burnt out building. 091821cjehovah14

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RE: Raglan Kingdom Hall Fire Investigation [REDACTED] [SEC=OFFICIAL]

1 message

[REDACTED]@police.nsw.gov.au>
To: [REDACTED]@peakelegal.com.au>

Wed, Nov 10, 2021 at 12:51 PM

Good afternoon [REDACTED],

I apologise for the delayed reply due to my current work load.

I am aware of the media articles surrounding the Jehovah's Witnesses featuring the Raglan Kingdom Hall.

The investigation in relation to the circumstances surrounding the fire at the Raglan Kingdom Hall is ongoing.

I can confirm the following –

- [REDACTED]

Regards,



[REDACTED] | Detective Senior Constable |
Chifley Police District | Ph:02 [REDACTED] | E/N: [REDACTED]
139 Rankin Street Bathurst 2795
Email: [REDACTED]@police.nsw.gov.au



From: [REDACTED]@peakelegal.com.au>
Sent: Wednesday, 10 November 2021 9:59 AM
To: [REDACTED]@police.nsw.gov.au>
Cc: [REDACTED]@outlook.com>
Subject: Fwd: Raglan Kingdom Hall Fire Investigation [REDACTED]

Dear Constable [REDACTED],

I refer to my below email, sent on Friday. I was just wanting to confirm that it reached you.

My client has also asked me to ensure that the Police are aware, that only days before the Bathurst (Raglan) Kingdom Hall was burned down, an article was published on the ABC news website and a Four Corners report was aired on the ABC, both of which contained inflammatory falsehoods about Jehovah's Witnesses, which in our view were capable of inciting hatred. The report and news article also featured footage of the Raglan Kingdom Hall as shown below.

This is a link to the Four Corners program: [Four Corners Report - Bearing Witness : ABC iview](#)

This is a link to the ABC News article: [Inside the brutal world of the Jehovah's Witnesses - ABC News](#)

We look forward to receipt of your advice regarding any evidence the police may have, that the fire was intentionally started.

Many thanks, Constable [REDACTED].

Kind regards

[REDACTED]

Peake Legal Solicitors



Peake Legal

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----- Forwarded message -----

From: [REDACTED]@peakelegal.com.au>

Date: Fri, Nov 5, 2021 at 4:03 PM

Subject: Raglan Kingdom Hall Fire Investigation [REDACTED]

To: [REDACTED]

Dear Constable [REDACTED],

I refer to our telephone conversation this afternoon.

We act on behalf of Jehovah's Witnesses Congregations Limited, the legal title holder of the Kingdom Hall of Jehovah's Witnesses premises located in Raglan NSW, which was recently the site of a fire. Our client holds the property on trust for the Bathurst Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses, which is an unincorporated association.

Our client is seeking any information or evidence that the Police have been able to uncover, or conclusions that they have drawn, which tend to establish whether or not the fire was started accidentally or intentionally, and if so by whom. Such evidence is critical to civil proceedings which our client wishes to commence as soon as possible.

We look forward to hearing from you at your earliest convenience.

Many thanks,

Kind regards

[REDACTED]

Peake Legal Solicitors



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please delete and notify the sender.

8 SPINKS: But again, what you are suggesting there is
9 that the congregation makes a decision to shun a victim.
10 If a victim or a survivor makes that decision themselves,
11 then they understand the implications. There is not
12 a situation where someone has disassociated because they
13 are a victim of child sexual abuse. But we just wanted to
14 make that point again.

15 THE CHAIR: I think the real issue is that, for some
16 people, the circumstances will be such that they just can't
17 stay, and they will find it necessary, for their own
18 survival, effectively, to disassociate. But the
19 consequence of that is they are shunned and lose all of
20 their prior social structure. That's the issue. And you
21 heard the evidence that some people gave about that issue.
22 That's the problem.

23 MR SPINKS: If I could, your Honour, with respect --

24 THE CHAIR: That doesn't happen in other parts of society,
25 generally.

26 MR SPINKS: Again, your Honour, with respect - and
27 I certainly don't want to be protesting the point --

28 THE CHAIR: Say what you believe to be true.

29 MR SPINKS: Thank you for that. The Commission has
30 consistently - and we respect the right of the Commission
31 to draw the conclusions, and Counsel Assisting. The
32 Commission has consistently failed to acknowledge that
33 individuals who want to leave the organisation of Jehovah's
34 Witnesses, no longer be an active member, can do that, by
35 conflating someone choosing to no longer be an active
36 member and someone specifically disassociating themselves,
37 saying, "I just don't agree with the organisation anymore,
38 I don't want to be a part of it" - they are two totally
39 separate things. Again, with respect, we just make the
40 point.

41
42 THE CHAIR: That was inherent in what I put to you. But
43 the consequence of disassociating, as we understand it, is
44 that that person will be shunned. That means they will
45 lose contact with family, friends, and everyone else who
46 remains inside the Jehovah's Witness organisation; is that
47 right?

1
2 MR SPINKS: Again, your Honour, the person can --
3
4 THE CHAIR: Your colleague is nodding; is that right or
5 not?
6
7 MR SPINKS: Because you have said "disassociated",
8 your Honour, but he or she can choose to be no longer an
9 active member of the congregation.
10
11 THE CHAIR: I understand that, but if they are so unable
12 to cope with what has happened and the way they have been
13 treated inside the organisation that they disassociate,
14 then they lose all of their previous social structure; is
15 that right?
16
17 MR SPINKS: That could be the case, and we respect their
18 right to make that decision.
19
20 THE CHAIR: It is a pretty cruel way of dealing with
21 someone, isn't it, who has suffered sexual abuse?
22
23 MR SPINKS: I could only repeat what I have said,
24 your Honour.
25
26 THE CHAIR: I know, but it is cruel, isn't it; to take
27 away, by reason of the rules that you impose, all of their
28 social structure, that's cruel?
29
30 MR O'BRIEN: Could I just interrupt, your Honour?
31 I believe the difference between disfellowshipping and
32 disassociation, the congregation takes the action in
33 disfellowshipping somebody, who is then shunned. The
34 person who disassociates themselves, they are taking the
35 action. Now, for whatever reason - I agree - not even with
36 regards to being a victim, others make the same decision -
37 they are actually the taking the stand to shun the
38 congregation from themselves, and they understand the
39 implications of that. Now, it is - I agree, it puts them
40 in a difficult situation, but it is a choice.
41
42 THE CHAIR: You see, someone who comes to you and says
43 "I was sexually abused", but because there are no two
44 witnesses you don't accept that, you don't make that
45 finding, they are left in a very difficult position, aren't
46 they?
47

1 MR O'BRIEN: If they choose not to report it to the
2 authorities, then --
3
4 THE CHAIR: For whatever reason. If the organisation
5 doesn't acknowledge that they were abused, that imposes
6 a great burden on them, doesn't it?
7
8 MR O'BRIEN: If I could again respectfully say,
9 your Honour, we don't disbelieve a person who makes an
10 accusation. That's why we investigate every accusation
11 brought forward by the elders.
12
13 THE CHAIR: Yes. But if there are not two witnesses, you
14 don't accept it, do you?
15
16 MR O'BRIEN: Because scripturally we're not able to.
17
18 THE CHAIR: I know. And that, you would understand, can
19 be very, very distressing for someone who has come to you
20 with that complaint, can't it?
21
22 MR O'BRIEN: Certainly. We acknowledge being a victim is
23 very distressing, whatever consequences come, yes, we
24 agree.
25
26 THE CHAIR: And that can lead to a chain of circumstances
27 where that person feels unable to do other than
28 disassociate from your organisation; correct?
29
30 MR SPINKS: Could I respectfully, your Honour, say we
31 don't want to be defensive and we acknowledge that
32 disassociation or disfellowshipping certainly have
33 implications. An individual can choose to be inactive.
34 Could I use very briefly a parallel? In my careful reading
35 of the issue papers from the Commission - and some of it
36 I don't understand; most of it I have. It has been very
37 well put together in the summaries - one reference said
38 that reporting is low across the community. One study -
39 we're not suggesting the Commission validated it, but it
40 was just referenced - in this country suggested that only
41 10 per cent of child abuse allegations - and I believe it
42 was in New South Wales, but I will be corrected on that -
43 lead to a conviction, and only around half of those lead to
44 a custodial sentence.
45
46 I mention that simply to say that if, on an occasion,
47 a victim of child abuse has felt that, where Jehovah's

1 Witnesses have taken a Bible-based stand, my heart also
2 goes out to the thousands of victims who have come forward
3 and asked for help, it has not resulted in a conviction or,
4 if it has, only half of those result in a custodial
5 sentence - so I just put it in the context that we are
6 extremely aware of the damage that is done where the
7 victim - it's compounded by the action that we, the police
8 or the courts take. And in that context, we absolutely,
9 absolutely agree with you.

10
11 THE CHAIR: I understand what you say, but can I just ask
12 you this simple question: why is it necessary, when
13 someone feels that they can no longer abide the
14 organisation and has to disassociate - why is it necessary
15 to shun them? Why can't they keep having social contact
16 with those people who happen to remain in the organisation?
17

18 MR SPINKS: I say again - and we're going to appear very
19 repetitive, and I apologise, your Honour, but the
20 individual can choose --
21

22 THE CHAIR: No, no, why is it necessary for the
23 organisation to tell all of its adherents, "You must shun
24 that person"?
25

26 MR SPINKS: Because the individual has not taken the
27 decision to no longer associate or to no longer be involved
28 with congregation activities, which is their right; they've
29 taken the decision to say, "I'm shunning the congregation,
30 I'm no longer a part of the congregation. I've put it in
31 writing." So the individual takes that action, and we
32 understand the implications. When someone is
33 disfellowshipped, the congregation takes that action. So
34 the individual does not need to put themselves in a
35 position where they are shunned. They can walk away. They
36 can go to another congregation. That's their personal
37 choice. But we understand and agree with the point you are
38 making, your Honour.
39

40 THE CHAIR: You haven't answered the point, but we'll move
41 on.
42

43 MR STEWART: Just answer the question, Mr Spinks. You
44 have not answered his Honour's question. His Honour's
45 question is: why is it necessary to shun the person who
46 disassociates? And before you answer, can you clarify one
47 thing: the person who disassociates, both you and Mr Brian

