

# True calling

**REVEREND DR PETER NORRIS, ACADEMIC AND PRIEST,  
HAS BEEN THE POPULAR WARDEN OF  
ST MARGARET'S COLLEGE FOR THE PAST 20 YEARS.**

**IN AN EMPLOYMENT** era where five-year tenures are generally considered long haul, 20 years in the same job is something of an exception. But then, being warden of St Margaret's College – as becomes apparent during the course of an exceedingly pleasant chat with the incumbent, Reverend Dr Peter Norris – is not your average job.

Nor is Norris your average employee. A Catholic priest, he holds two bachelor's degrees, a diploma in teaching, a diploma for graduates, a Master of Arts and a PhD from Notre Dame University – all of which makes him eminently qualified to teach alongside his academic colleagues at the University of Otago as, on occasion, he has done.

But his true calling, as he discovered in 1989, is the pastoral care and academic support of the residents at St Margaret's College, a role he has diligently fulfilled for two decades, as countless former and current "wards" will attest.

Norris was destined – or at least he thought he was – to teach at a seminary, until fate intervened rather prosaically in the form of a Presbyterian minister friend who saw the St Margaret's job advertised and sourced the application documents for his co-denominational friend.

It might, on the face of it, seem an anomaly: St Margaret's was established in 1911 as a Presbyterian college "for the care and protection of young women", and Norris laughingly recalls how he became "persona non grata" for the then Bishop of Christchurch when he accepted the warden position in 1989. But then Norris has made a point of being ecumenically-minded ever since he was ordained and one doubts whether an elderly senior cleric would ever stop him from anything he set his mind to.

Peter Joseph Norris was born in Westport in 1950 to a father who worked in the railways and a mother who stayed at home with the kids. He thought a church career would provide him with a means of helping people, so he joined the priesthood in 1976 and pursued postgraduate study in Christian history. He has conducted research at the Vatican libraries, and even met the Pope Benedict XVI, whom he credits with "total concentration". ("Sixty thousand people around you and it's just like the two of you are in a room by yourselves," he recalls.) Norris is, by many measures, an achiever.

Little surprise that one finds in him an inquiring intellect and a gentle, but steadfast, strength. These qualities lend him a gravitas that is, in turn, tempered by infectious warmth and a genuine interest in people; all traits that have informed his commitment to the college with which his identity has become almost indistinguishable.

"Peter is an extremely caring person, a very able administrator and a true academic," says his former neighbour and long-time colleague Ashley Day, previously warden at Unicol and now warden of Carrington College. "He runs his college superbly. I don't think there'd be any amongst us [fellow wardens] who would spend the same amount of one-on-one time with students that he does."

This personal touch is something Norris believes sets St Margaret's apart from many other colleges. Early in the year he meets with every new resident (although St Margaret's reserves between 30 to 40 per cent of its places for returning students) to get to know them and discuss their course of study and other aspects of university life, for example. He



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Photo: Alan Dove

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also retains contact with many former residents long after their time as “SMAGgies”, as they are affectionately known, has ended. He has officiated at the marriage of former residents and has even baptised St Margaret’s “grandchildren” – testimony to the strong family atmosphere that he endeavours to create.

He acknowledges that it has become more difficult to maintain this approach as the college has grown – he has overseen its development from the 150 beds he inherited to its current capacity of 226 – and he believes it will be almost impossible to sustain if the college expands further. Nonetheless, he accepts expansion is probably inevitable.

“Economies of scale are the main driver,” he explains. “These days things like health and safety and building compliance come at a huge cost, so the bigger you are the lower the unit cost for amortising that. I’d be negligent if I didn’t prepare for expansion in terms of our infrastructure, but I don’t want it to happen while I’m still here.”

Another of Norris’s passions is the provision of rounded educational opportunities for St Margaret’s residents, most of whom are Health Sciences students. He sees this as an important role that the college can fulfil.

“The Health Sciences first-year course is fairly brutal,” says Norris. “It’s one of the toughest courses I’ve seen, so it’s easy for the kids to become fixated on grades and for their learning to take on a narrow focus. We aim to provide a more rounded educational experience through our art, for example, the garden, the choir, and we try to get good mentors in. We try to stimulate kids and get them thinking about something different from their studies.”

Mentors include regular dinner speakers and guests with whom residents can discuss anything from US national security policy to the spiritual elements of general practice. It’s an aspect of life at St Margaret’s of which Norris is very proud. Dr David Gerrard, Associate Dean of Medicine for the last 10 years and now Director of Development and Alumni Relations, is one of the Sunday evening dinner guests at St Margaret’s and attests

that the collegial atmosphere there has definitely resulted in many enhanced admissions to second-year medicine.

Recognising the value of humanities-based learning, Norris also supports student-run language suppers where residents practise languages learned at school or overseas.

“Just because our kids are doing Health Sciences, I don’t want them to let their French or Japanese turn to custard. And languages stimulate them in different ways.”

Unsurprisingly, Peter Norris is a fervent advocate for (and prime example of) lifelong learning and he believes travel is an integral part of this process. He encourages students to take advantage of exchange electives and postgraduate study opportunities overseas.

“I’ve the old-fashioned view that if world peace is going to come, it’s not going to be because a lot of elderly gentlemen got round a table, but because people from different places, religions and cultures learn from each other. It’s going to be because students in places like this have studied together, travelled together and have become friends.”

All people, Norris believes, are fundamentally good, a belief regularly reinforced by the young adults he meets in the course of his work, many of whom, he points out, undertake charity initiatives or go out of their way to assist other residents who might be in need of support.

“There’s a lot said in the media about kids being vandals and so on, but it’s really not the case. Of the 20,000 students here at Otago, the problem ones are a very small percentage. It’s minuscule really.”

So when, one wonders, might the unceasingly optimistic and energetic Peter Norris think about retiring? His response, usually measured, comes very quickly.

“When I stop relating to the students. I’ve told friends to tell me when that happens. I can still joke and it’s still a lot of fun. If it stopped being fun that’d be a good sign that I was no longer relating to the students, and if I was getting out of touch then I wouldn’t be effective, would I?”

*Rebecca Tansley*