



Historical Society

of the Uniting Church
in South Australia

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First religious services at Kangarilla were held in Bottrill's barn
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EDITORIAL

Recently I attended the final service of one of our small congregations. It had a life-span of fifty-four years and served the neighbourhood well in that time. But social change ultimately prevailed, and so the leaders of the congregation decided it was time to move on.

The special brochure prepared for the final service contained some brief information about the origins of the congregation. Selected speakers told us about some of the people and activities they remembered before they moved elsewhere. The final speaker briefly outlined how the present members were viewing the future.

Closure of congregations in both urban and rural areas has become a common feature in the life of the Uniting Church. Yet the history of these congregations is often inadequately documented with the result that there are serious gaps in our overall understanding of the Church and its place in our continually changing society.

Every effort must be made to collect our historical data comprehensively, in order that disciplined serious study may be undertaken. It is important that the underlying themes and issues be appreciated for present and future use. This kind of approach to history is very much geared to "excavating the future" of the Uniting Church in South Australia.

In this newsletter four local church histories are reviewed. The compilers approach the task in very different ways.

Dean Eland also tells how he views the purpose for writing local church histories.

In view of the importance of this activity, the Uniting Church Historical Society is planning a workshop in 2007 on how to go about local church history writing. It is hoped this will encourage congregations, large and small, to tell their stories, so that the whole Uniting Church in South Australia will reap the benefit.

Kevin Secomb

FORTHCOMING

There is to be a celebration of the 40th Anniversary of those ministers who were ordained in 1966.

This will be held at Kent Town Church on Sunday 22nd October at 10 am, and reported on in the next newsletter.

There will also be consideration given to Dr Andrew Dutney's 2005 lecture to the Society, "So different so quickly": the impact of Church Union on the Ministry.

**The Society is pleased to announce that the
Gordon Rowe Memorial Lecture
is to be delivered
by the noted Church Historian and Lecturer,
Professor Emeritus, The Rev'd Dr Ian Breward,
titled**

'THE SIGNIFICANCE OF Rev'd Dr HAROLD WOOD'

(The Lecture will examine the contribution
made by this Church Leader)

**FRIDAY 17 NOVEMBER 2006
Lecture to commence at 8pm
following the AGM at 7.30pm.**

**at
Uniting Church History Centre,
44a East Avenue Black Forest**

Supper to follow the Lecture.

Ian Breward was professor of Church History from 1982 until 1999 at the United Faculty of Theology in Melbourne, and was Senior Associate Professor of the History Department at the University of Melbourne.

Among his many publications are

- "Australia - the most godless place under heaven?" which contains the five Bicentennial Lectures sponsored by the Melbourne College of Divinity.
- "A History of the Australian Churches" published in 1993, and
- "A History of the Churches in Australasia" published in 2002.

These and others of his works are widely read and Ian has national acclaim for his research, writing, and lecturing.

Postscript

Uniting Church people and others will remember with deep appreciation the very great contribution made by Rev D'Arcy Wood and Janet Wood to church life in so many ways during their years in South Australia. This is an invaluable opportunity to learn about their inspirational father/father-in-law.

Spread the word about this important event: the contribution of a great Australian Church leader will be assessed by one of the best Australian Church historians. Be there. Bring others.

Editor

HISTORY OF CONGREGATIONS: FOR WHAT PURPOSE?

Dean Eland

Some people find it hard to get excited about the history of congregations. Leaders may be struggling with the pastoral and ministry demands of the present and will be encouraging members to think about the future. Many may be puzzled by an emphasis on past events and experiences and those few enthusiasts who are looking over their shoulder at what has gone before!

Some months ago I was talking with a couple in the Pilgrim congregation who are passionate about State education. In our conversation it became clear that this couple had joined this congregation without knowing that the first minister, the Rev Thomas Quinton Stow was a leading public figure in SA and a strong advocate of a state-led education system which was free, compulsory and non sectarian! In effect their passion was very similar to that of Stow and the building in which they were worshiping once had the name Stow Memorial!

Developing an appreciation of our past may open doors into the future as this congregation is engaged in a serious conversation about what it means to be a public church and to be a servant community in the city.

In my research on lay leaders in the Port Adelaide congregation, in the final decades of the 19th century, I discovered that many were civic leaders in the community and some became leaders of conservative political parties in the State. This revelation helped me to understand how the church made a significant contribution to what is now called *social capital*. Clearly the Port Adelaide Congregational church contributed a great deal to community life through its leaders and this was a challenge to me when I was minister there in the 1980s. I found that I was struggling with the question which history prompted: how could the congregation again be part of community life and assist in bringing people together to work for the health and well being of community?

The history of a congregation will inform us about the journey of faith but memories will also open doors to creative imagination. Histories also explain why congregations are unique social entities each with their own DNA! In effect, our past has shaped our outlook and traditions, and we cannot face the future without coming to terms with the past.

There were many occasions at Port Adelaide when my eye was drawn to the first world war memorial with its long list of names of young men who were sent to war. My prayers for world peace were more passionate as I was prompted to think about the cost of their sacrifice.

Other memorials in that building reminded me of ministers who had set great examples of pastoral ministry, social witness and evangelism. Often these ministries were at great personal cost. Two ministers, the first and third, each served for 28 years! While these ministries have a different form today elders were often surprised that these three foundations of church life were frequently reaffirmed by the commitments we made and the priorities we gave to community ministry.

Let's have more local church histories so we can value what has been achieved. The insights which we gain however will also help us be more creative about our future.

SOME RECENT LOCAL CHURCH HISTORIES

GEORGE W. POTTER

"A Chapel in the Horseshoe Section": Noarlunga Wesleyan Methodist Chapel (1855-2005). (Published by Old Noarlunga Uniting Church, 2005)

JILL ROHRLACH (Compiler)

Kangarilla Uniting Church 1856-2006: 150 years of Praise and 150 years of Worship. (Published by Kangarilla Uniting Church, 2006)

GEOFFREY C. BISHOP

"The Spire on the Parade": Clayton Wesley Uniting Church (1856-2006). (Beulah Park, SA, published by Clayton Wesley Uniting Church, 2006)

DEAN ELAND

Cheltenham Community and Church: Introduction to an Adelaide suburban community and a local church. (Black Forest, SA, published by the Historical Society of the Uniting Church in SA, 2005, 1st edn)

Three of these histories were compiled to help celebrate 150 years of church life in local areas. Two of the four celebrate church life in rural centres south of the Adelaide metropolitan area, in Old Noarlunga and Kangarilla. The other two come from suburban congregations, one situated in Beulah Park, east of Adelaide, and the other in Cheltenham in the west. While three of these congregations are still maintaining their witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Cheltenham congregation was disbanded in 1973 after being in existence for sixty years.

The **Clayton Wesley** church history, true to good Protestant form, begins with a text (Ephesians 2:19-21) as its guiding light in the subsequent recording of the history of the congregation. Drawing on words used in introducing the centennial history, Dr Bishop writes, "A church is not the structure of stone, brick, timber and glass of the buildings, which the world sees as it goes by but the fellowship which meets, worships and works there, week by week and generation by generation." Then he quotes the Rev Sidney M Munn who had said at a church anniversary in the 1950s, "Do not let our church be inspired by sentimental attachment to the dead past, but rather by the Spirit of our living Lord..."

These words provide a worthy benchmark for all who undertake the task of local church history writing. In so many instances much space is given over to the story of the raising up of buildings and their fate. Consequently the faith stories of the people involved are quite overshadowed.

There are situations, however, where the history writer is faced with almost a complete dearth of information. This is what faced George Potter as he set about his task. Taking what little information he had available to him, he pieced together the story of the life and times of the people in each era of the one hundred and fifty years, and presented the congregation as being a part of that setting. The **Old Noarlunga** local church history is therefore presented largely in an historical essay format. It is brief, but effective, a worthy memento to be treasured as a record of the 150 years celebration by a small rural congregation.

The **Kangarilla** church history is much more ambitious. It is almost a coffee-table volume, being of large format, printed on high quality paper, and containing many photographs, both coloured and black and white. Apparently only a brief account was produced for the centenary celebrations. This time the members of the "150th Anniversary Book Committee" were obviously determined the record was to be more comprehensive.

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They certainly succeeded. This book contains a wide variety of written material interspersed with photographs and lists of names. There are the ministers, Sunday School teachers and Scholars, and people who gave substantial service to other groups and organisations of the Kangarilla church. There is even quite a comprehensive list of the weddings that have been celebrated in the present church building, along with many photos of the wedding parties.

There is a lot of interest in lists of names as local people stir their memories. They also provide valuable information to historians seeking to discover links that will serve to enhance the overall historical narrative. However, such lists can be handled better through well-organised appendices than being incorporated in the body of the text. It is important to develop the story of what happened over the years with clarity. Lists of names do tend to hinder the achievement of that goal.

This book contains a remarkable amount of information regarding the Kangarilla church from its earliest days to the present. However, it does have a problem with structure.

As a contrast, the **Clayton Wesley** story is developed by the writer in a very orderly fashion. This is clearly seen in the way matters are laid down in the table of contents and carefully followed throughout the whole book. Beginning with the origins of the Clayton congregation under the heading "The Clayton Church Fellowship", the narrative leads up to the open-ended "Looking to the Future".

This local church history is one of a series of such histories prepared over the years. This writer is very mindful of the work done by predecessors. As well as acknowledging their contributions, he has been able to add to many of the matters previously raised in such a way that brings clarification and further enrichment to the material. This indicates the importance of having history written up more than once, because another writer in a different era can provide another perspective.

While this history follows on from what other Clayton (Congregational) church historians have written in earlier years, the present church has significantly changed its identity. This has come about by the amalgamation with Norwood Wesley Church (previously Methodist). And later the Uniting Church, St Morris (previously Methodist). Both these congregations had their own histories prior to the amalgamation. In fact, Wesley Church would have a history starting much the same time as Clayton's.

Dr Bishop has included these two congregations in his history with impartiality. However it is not easy to get away from the image of two tributaries joining the main river. Following on from previous Clayton histories, it is not surprising that Clayton comes through as the major theme. Yet predecessors came from the other two congregations as well.

This is an issue that has to be taken into account by all local church historians who now write within the context of the Uniting Church. It is especially important where the congregation has experienced amalgamations and continues to develop life as a new identity.

This is not the issue for Dean Eland in this particular contribution he makes to local church history. As the **Cheltenham Congregational** church was closed 33 years ago, its history (1913-1973) can be seen in quite a different perspective. He has chosen to record quite a full account of the historical development of the suburban area in that region of metropolitan Adelaide. In this way, it can be demonstrated the local church has an identifiable context to which it is to be responsive as part of its service to the community. Eland is not only able to write about the life of the Cheltenham church during its sixty years but is also able to describe its decline and ending. He is in a position to bring out

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the importance of various changes that impacted on that local church. But he does not see his work is complete. He believes there is more material that needs to be added in: hence the insistence this effort is only the first edition.

It is also instructive to compare rural and suburban local church histories. Briefly, Kangarilla church has had support from an identifiable group of local families and their descendants for generations. This is a situation that is beginning to break down in the urban environment. As Dr. Bishop notes the present members of Clayton Wesley live in 41 different suburbs. This situation is bound to have a profound impact on local church life from now on, and will have important consequences for the whole Uniting Church as it grapples with the issue of gaining unity from diversity.

THE KENT TOWN UNITING CHURCH PROPERTY – A WHITE ELEPHANT?

It would be easy to believe that the large Kent Town Uniting Church property is little more than a mute witness to a bygone era. But this is not how Mark Symons, a leading layman in that congregation, sees it.

Earlier in the year when Uniting Church Historical Society members visited Kent Town they heard that the use of the property has increased considerably in the past five years. A wide variety of community groups use the halls on a regular weekly basis. These activities have resulted in use of the halls every week night, Saturdays and Monday mornings by over 600 people per week.

The regular Sunday morning service is attended by a congregation of approximately 50 people. To that must be added the special services of worship which are held, for example, by Prince Alfred College and Pembroke School. In addition there are 30 or more wedding services conducted each year. It is estimated that 8,000 to 10,000 people pass through the church doors in a year.

The church building itself is a superb venue for classical music. The acoustics are eminently suitable for choirs and instrumentalists. Musically, the pipe organ holds pride of place. If it could be completed according to original plans by the addition of a third manual, many knowledgeable organists believe it would be made one of the best pipe organs in Australia.

The issue for the congregation and the Uniting Church at large is to find the way to use this property heritage to the glory of God.

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Would-be historians please note!

(1) Whitehead, Anne, *Paradise Misaid: In Search of the Australian Tribe of Paraguay*, (St Lucia, Queensland, University of Queensland Press, 1997).

A HISTORY FLASHBACK – FROM NORTH ADELAIDE TO PARAGUAY

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a group of Australians began a settlement in the South American country of Paraguay in order to fulfil their utopian dream of a perfect society. Those involved believed Australia was beyond redemption, and so they were setting about the creation of a “New Australia”. Recently the ABC TV programme “Foreign Correspondent” (26-9-06) included a segment on this “communistic” experiment as the noted poet, Dame Mary Gilmore, called it. She herself had been a young teacher for the children of the settlement. In 2006 the ABC reporter paid a visit to the area to see if anything of this bold venture remained.

He spoke to descendants of the Wood family at their annual reunion. Over the years there had been a great deal of intermarriage with the Indian and Spanish people of Paraguay, but there were still strong traces of Australian culture and loyalties remaining. Many of these descendants still lived on and worked the land that had originally been granted to the Australians. The TV reporter described it as a “slice of Australia in Paraguay from an Australia that no longer exists”.

While people from many parts of Australia were attracted to the “New Australia” movement, it is interesting to recall that there were also people who went from the Wellington Square Primitive Methodist Church and Brougham Place Congregational Church, North Adelaide to the settlement in Paraguay.

George and Helen Birks from Adelaide joined the second contingent to leave Australia in December, 1893. George Napier Birks, a 55-year-old homeopathic chemist, and his wife Helen, had decided to join their two adult sons in Paraguay. As members of the North Adelaide Primitive Methodist Church they had been greatly influenced during the ministry of the Rev Hugh Gilmore to consider seriously the implementation of Christian socialism. Unfortunately George Birks was already a sick man when he started out on this venture. As a result he was able to contribute very little to his new community, and after a long illness he died in Paraguay in September, 1895.

His widow, Helen, and some other members of the family returned to Adelaide. Others remained at the New Australia settlement. A descendant, Oscar Birks, was an influential businessman in Paraguay during 1997, so it could be likely there are Birks descendants still in that country.

John Sibbald and his wife were members of the Brougham Place Congregational church. John was an accountant, and quite prominent in the church’s activities. Perhaps this couple were like the Birks and wanted to find expression for their Christian socialism. The minister at the Brougham Place church was the Rev Fred Hastings (1889-1893). After resigning from that position, Hastings took a trip to Paraguay, where he stayed for a while with the Sibbalds. During his time at the settlement. Hastings conducted at least one service of worship and baptised a couple of children. This was unusual, because the New Australian settlements were to be completely secular. It is not clear where Hastings went after this visit; perhaps returned to England.

There were other church-related Adelaide people who went to Paraguay. Some returned to Adelaide and others went to other countries. One of Hugh Gilmore’s sons, Joe, who had been a lay travelling preacher at Morgan SA, was a deck-hand on the barque *Royal Tar*, the boat that took the people to Paraguay. Probably he also stayed at the New Australia settlement for a while. He apparently did not return to Adelaide.

In the 1990s, Anne Whitehead retraced the journey of the idealistic Australians and wrote of them and her experiences, in *Paradise Mislaid: In Search of the Australian Tribe of Paraguay*.(1997) She was present when a memorial plaque, written in Spanish, was unveiled at the Municipal Theatre in the Paraguayan city of Asuncion. It reads:

23 AUGUST 1883 – 23 AUGUST 1993

“To commemorate the centenary of the arrival of a large contingent of Australians to settle in this country, the descendants wish to honour and record their arrival at this theatre which served as their first refuge. In a quest for a more just society they crossed oceans and confronted many difficulties.”

This was signed by the Mayor of Asuncion and the Australian Ambassador to Paraguay.

Whitehead comments, “As the colonists actually arrived on 22 September, 1893, the plaque, cast by a firm in Melbourne, was out by one day, one month and a whole decade.” She adds, “But errors set in bronze have a way of becoming history” (p164).1.

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