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THE UNITING CHURCH IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA



HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

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A MUST FOR MEMBERS

On Sunday May 10 at 3 p.m. in the Malvern Church (Marlborough Street) a service will be held to commemorate the founding of the first Methodist Wesleyan society in South Australia.

This took place on May 11, 1837 in the home of Edward Stephens somewhere near the railway station and was attended by fifteen people.

The service at Malvern is being organised by the society and will be conducted by the President, Rev. W.J. Stafford. The address will be given by Dr. Arnold Hunt. The Moderator, Dr. Charles Biggs, will take part and the lessons will be read by descendants of original members.

We are anxious to see many descendants of the fifteen members at the service at Malvern. It is known that there are descendants in South Australia of the following:

JACOB ABBOTT
TABITHA WICKHAM
JOSEPH AND ELIZABETH MIDDLETON
ISAAC AND ELIZABETH JACOBS

Readers of this Newsletter are asked to advise any descendants whom they may know of this service.

THE SOCIETY ASKS FOR THE SUPPORT OF MEMBERS IN ATTENDING THIS SERVICE.

OLD MINUTE BOOK FOUND

Rev. R.J. Scrimgeour

Recently a photocopy of the minute book of the Deacon's Court of the Free Presbyterian Church at Aldinga (1856-1880) came into my hands. The minutes are dated May 3, 1858 to July 9, 1873, with a break of six years from 1861 - 1867. There is also a Communicants' Roll dated 1874 and the list of seat holders in 1867.

The foundation stone of the Aldinga Church was laid on May 5, 1856 and the church was opened on December 4. It was part of the independent Free Church based at Morphett Vale under the leadership of Rev. James Benny. The minute book deals with events in the church for most of its active life.

History of book

The minute book itself has an interesting history. One of the original elders of the church was John McRae who came to South Australia in March 1840. His son, Finlay Donald McRae, was clerk of the Deacons' Court and the minute book was in his possession when the church closed about 1880. When he died in 1904 the book was retained by his daughter, Katherine. She married an Englishman, Alfred Blackall, and they had one son, Geoffrey. They moved to Western Australia and then, in 1913, to England. In succeeding years the family lived in Spain, Germany, Canada and the USA. When Katherine died in 1950 the minute book was found among her papers by her son Geoffrey. As a journalist he recognised its historical significance and forwarded it to the National Library in Canberra. He died in 1981.

The existence of the book was discovered only recently when Colin and Christine McRae of Monteith were researching their family history. They had obtained the address of Geoffrey's widow, Elizabeth, in England and she told them of the minute book in Canberra. After one unsuccessful attempt to locate the book they asked relatives in Canberra to search for them and in January of this year it was found and photocopied and the McRaes thoughtfully have handed a copy to me.

Church's early years

The minutes make interesting reading. They began soon after the church was completed 'at a cost of Five hundred and sixty pounds, eight shillings and one halfpence. Amount collected by subscription was three hundred and seventy nine pounds, eight shillings and one halfpence - the remainder was made up by the Trustees and the Church now stands free. The amount collected at the Church door from Eighth of April 1858 to the fourteenth of July 1858 was Three pounds, six shillings and fourpence.'

On 19 July, 1859 it was decided to invite Mr. Alexander Anderson to labour amongst them while 'prosecuting his studies for the ministry' and a stipend of 100 pounds per year and a rent-free house was agreed upon. A year later the court met to consider whether Anderson should be called as a minister of the Aldinga Free Church but the opinion of those present was that he 'was not competent to fulfil the office at present.' (As our Presbyterians they were no doubt very hard to please.)

George Benny

There is a break in the minutes until 1 February, 1867. By this time George Benny, brother of Rev. James Benny of Morphett Vale, had been ordained and inducted into the cause at Aldinga. He was the only resident ordained minister in the history of that church. It would seem that one of the first tasks after he began work there on 17 January, 1867 was to revive the Deacons' Court. Three decisions were made that day: that charges for seatings in the church be 3/6 each, paid quarterly in advance and that Mr. D. Stewart draw up a plan of sittings and

OLD MINUTE BOOK FOUND contd.

subscribers were requested to attend on the following Thursday to choose their sittings, that a plate be presented at the church door each Sunday for collections, and that a water-closet be erected as soon as convenient. This was 10 years after the erection of the church.

On 13 January, 1868 a Mr. A. McDonald made a claim to the Court for possession of a seat formerly held by him. It was decided that he had no claim to it. Stewart strongly objected to the claim being heard as there was no charge against the Deacons for having dispossessed him of his seat. Later, on 31 May, at the request of George Benny, a further sentence was added to the minute of 13 January to the effect that McDonald had said that he would raise the matter in a higher court. Nine months later, on 2 February, 1869, the Presbytery met at Aldinga and heard the case but refused to sustain the complaint as 'no mala fides (*bad faith*) appeared in the actings of the Deacons' Court and Presbytery deemed it inexpedient to sustain complaints against the ordinary administration of financial matters'.

Money matters

Things were often difficult for George Benny. On 4 February, 1868 he asked the Court that a horse be provided to enable him to visit the people more frequently. The Court regretted that, owing to insufficient funds, it had to refuse the request. On 5 April, 1870 he complained of the great deficiency of twenty nine pounds eleven shillings in his salary for the past year. He was unable, he said, to maintain his household and meet expenses incurred in his ministerial duties on his stipend of seventy pounds nine shillings. After a long debate by the Court a congregational meeting was summoned on 11 April. At this meeting it was decided that 'in the opinion of all present that we are unable to give any more support to our minister than we at present give'. A month later Benny moved to Morphett Vale to take charge of John Knox school.

Last days of church

After George Benny left, the services were taken by students who were being trained by James Benny, particularly W.R. Buttrose. James Benny conducted the sacraments at regular intervals. There were always financial difficulties and by 1875 it was decided to discontinue Sunday services but to hold communion services three times a year. In 1879 the Presbytery worked on a plan to unite Yankalilla and Aldinga under an ordained minister and both churches were asked to report on 2 February, 1880 on the amount of money they could raise. On that day Mr. A. McCallum, session clerk of Aldinga, did not appear but sent a note to James Benny:

Rev. and Dear Sir,

I am sorry to inform you that I have not succeeded in collecting towards the support of a minister, there is but few of us and some are preparing to leave the district and the building would cost so much to repair it, so that we will have to give it up for the present. Should I go down (to Presbytery) I would be of no service as I got nothing to bring before you.

Yours faithfully

A. McCallum

The church then closed and today its crumbling walls can be seen between Aldinga and Willunga.

It is hoped to have the old minute book placed in the Presbyterian collection in the Mortlock Library. If that is not possible, a good quality facsimile copy will be obtained. As one of the few records of the Aldinga Free Presbyterian Church, it would be an interesting addition to the Archives.

MORNING CLOUD OR SPRING RAINS

In response to numerous requests we print here a substantial portion of the address given at the service at the Old Gum Tree on 25 January by Dr. James S. Udy. This was attended by nearly 500 people including descendants from interstate of John White, the preacher at the first service on 22 January 1837. The service on 25 January was conducted by the Rev. David Oxley of the Glenelg parish. Dr. Udy, the preacher, is a minister in the NSW Synod, President of the World Methodist Historical Society and a great grandson of John White.

Ed.

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YOUR LOVE IS LIKE A MORNING CLOUD,
LIKE THE DEW THAT GOES EARLY AWAY.

These words from Hosea 6 : 4 formed the sermon text used when John Charles White conducted the first Methodist service on the mainland of South Australia near this Old Gum Tree 150 years ago.

We have gathered here today, many of White's direct descendants, together with civic and religious leaders, to celebrate this important historic occasion.

Some may wonder why we celebrate this Methodist event when the Methodist Church, to which John Charles White faithfully gave his allegiance over a long lifetime, has now joined with the Presbyterian and Congregational Churches in Australia to form the Uniting Church in Australia. Let me attempt an answer.

It is a fact of life that we must be aware of our roots in the past if we are to face the future with confidence. Otherwise, like orphaned children, we search restlessly for our parentage.

Historical awareness helps to enrich a church's corporate life and community mission. It strengthens the feelings of identity by making more real the continuity of the church's life and the sense of belonging within its membership. Edmund Burke, prominent British statesman in the 18th century, once wisely commented: 'People will not look forward to posterity who never look backwards to their ancestry.'

Membership in the Uniting Church can be enriched for each of us if we claim the heritage of the past that flows to us through the previous Presbyterian, Congregational and Methodist Churches. It is particularly important that we celebrate this Methodist event in this state because of the rich contribution of Methodism to its life.

For at least seventy five years since the beginning of white settlement in South Australia the people called Methodists - whether Wesleyan Methodist, Primitive Methodist or Bible Christian - comprised about 25% of the population of this state. It is natural therefore that today we thank God for the gifts and graces of those pioneer Methodists. They laboured and we have entered into their labours.

Who was John Charles White?

John Charles White was born in Thorpe near Colchester of Welsh parents in 1813. Both his parents died of tuberculosis when he was quite young. He was brought up by his grandparents. The discipline they administered was strict. One of his children, whom we knew as Aunty Till, used to tell the story of the grandmother tying him to a chair with a piece of cotton. If he was sufficiently restless to break the cotton he was in trouble. At an early age he was apprenticed to a baker.

Although formal education was rudimentary, White developed a strong urge for learning. There is a family tradition, for which I can find no documentary evidence, that by 19 John had a smattering of seven languages, including Greek and Hebrew. We know that he studied for the Methodist local preacher's exam at Wesley's Chapel, City Road, London. He secured his local preacher's certificate when he was 21.

MORNING CLOUD OR SPRING RAINS contd.

Quickly John developed a reputation as an eloquent and powerful preacher. He was invited to preach in some of the leading Methodist churches in London including Hoxton where he assisted the ex-President of the Methodist Conference, the Rev. Joseph Taylor.

White offered as a candidate for the Wesleyan Methodist Ministry in 1834 while he was still 21. He wanted to go to South Africa as a missionary. However, he was rejected on medical grounds. As he was suffering from a lung complaint, he was advised to go to Australia to improve his health. This proved to be wise advice as he lived a full life until 91, raising 12 children, including the first twins born to migrants in South Australia.

Just at the time when White's hopes to become a Methodist Minister were dashed there was growing public interest in London concerning the new colony of South Australia. A large public meeting of approximately 2500 people had been held in Exeter Hall during January 1834.

White applied to go to South Australia as an assistant in the bank. While he was waiting for a passage he would naturally have read letters from Methodist ministers who were working in New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land. He would have had access to the famous letter written by Wesleyan school teachers, Bowden and Hosking, who were in charge of the Sydney charity schools. Here he would have read of the sordid conditions in the two prison colonies described in the following graphic words:

...from the description of the people sent hither much good cannot be expected. The higher ranks of those who were formerly convicts are, in general, either entirely occupied in amassing wealth, or rioting in sensuality. The lower orders are, indeed, the filth and off-scouring of the earth, in point of wickedness, long accustomed to idleness and iniquity of every kind, here they indulged their vicious inclinations without a blush...all those ties of moral order which bind society together, are not only relaxed, but almost extinct.

John White knew that South Australia would be different from New South Wales, because all people going there would be free settlers. But he also knew that human nature was much the same everywhere. Therefore, these letters from early Australian Methodist Ministers would certainly have coloured his preaching when he arrived in Australia.

Journey to South Australia

John White left England with his wife and two children during September 1836. (The most exciting event of the trip for the Whites was the discovery at Capetown that the Governor was Sir Benjamin D'Urban, who had been the friend and chief of Mrs. White's father when he had been crown solicitor in the West Indies. Sir Benjamin invited all 156 passengers on the 662 ton vessel *Coromandel* to visit Government House. When no one was allowed to leave the ship he sent baskets of fruit). The travellers finally arrived in Holdfast Bay (Glenelg) four months after leaving England.

Eight days after the *Coromandel* arrived, John White arranged for the first Methodist service on the South Australian mainland in a tent, used as the first South Australia bank. The manager of the South Australia Company Bank, Edward Stephens, had also travelled from England in the *Coromandel*.

The scene of that first Methodist service on the mainland is hard for us to imagine today. There was a line of tents above the high water line. The furniture for the church service consisted of barrels from the ship and pieces of driftwood. At the back of the tent were the portable banking house and iron chests Stephens had brought from England in order to establish the bank in the new colony.

MORNING CLOUD OR SPRING RAINS contd.

White's first sermon

White remembered 50 years after the event that his first sermon in Australia was on the text of Hosea 6:4: *Your love is like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away.*

We don't know exactly what White said, but the passage he chose reflected clearly the line of his thinking as he spoke to those early settlers. It was most appropriate that John White should sound a warning lest the faithlessness of so many migrants in other Australian colonies should be repeated in the new colony. So he focussed the attention of his hearers on the words of Hosea to God's people.

This was not the final word spoken in that big tent 150 years ago. As he stressed the judgment of God as stated in Hosea 6:4, he would also have emphasised with equal strength the grace of God, clearly stated by Hosea a couple of verses earlier in these touching words:

Come, let us return to the Lord. For he has torn and he will heal us.

In his careful preparation for the local preacher's exams John would have learned that the grace of God 'like spring rains' falls on the good and the bad, on the just and the unjust. He would have been taught by his Methodist mentors at City Road that the grace of God does not depend on God choosing some and rejecting others, but was available to all. Can you imagine the 24 year old John White recounting the deeply moving story of Hosea to the migrants who had just spent four months cooped up in a small ship and who were looking forward to a new life in the colony of South Australia. John had two small children and his wife was pregnant with the third. He could, therefore, identify with Hosea long ago.

Listen to John's voice as he preached to those early settlers on this spot 150 years ago:

Hosea dearly loved Gomer. To them 3 children were born, two sons and a daughter. But Gomer rejected Hosea's love and became a prostitute, selling her body for financial gain.

What was Hosea to do? Reject her and leave her to be scorned by the community. No. His love remains strong, although she continued to reject it.

Through this deep personal tragedy of rejected love Hosea came to understand more clearly the love of God for his people. This love was given freely to all, not because they deserved it, for they did not, but because it was the nature of the divine to love those whom he created.

I imagine the concluding words of John White were something like these:

We settlers in this new land will be inclined to play the harlot and be faithless like Gomer. We will be inclined to reject God's grace as we struggle to make money in this new land and as we set up idols to worship. Our love for God will be 'like a morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away'.

As we play the harlot we will experience God's judgment in our lives. But the good news of the Gospel is that God will still love us. Yes, in the words of Hosea 'He will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth'.

Early days

Those who took regular services included John White, Jacob Abbott and William Pearce. Four months after the commencement of these services the Wesleyan Methodist Society was formed. Here John White and Jacob Abbott were asked to be class leaders and John White was appointed superintendent with responsibility for preaching and general oversight of the young Methodist community.

MORNING CLOUD OR SPRING RAINS contd.

At the first Quarterly Meeting on 24 June it was decided to erect a chapel on land in Hindley Street. Opened on 18 March 1838, this was the first church in the city of Adelaide. White helped to cut the limestone and, when the work was all finally completed, he preached at the first service.

Three months later in May 1838 John White prepared the plan of services for the Adelaide circuit of the Wesleyan Methodist Church. This listed 5 local preachers and 3 'on trial'. White preached himself at least twice a month.

I have in my possession an interesting letter written in 1915 by John Ottaway. Let me read from this faded but very well written letter. *I, when a boy, was a scholar in the first Sunday School which Mr. White formed in Hindley Street. There was no minister then in the colony. My memory goes back to over 77 years in South Australia. I am now nearly 86 years of age. It is clear from this letter that John White had made a deep impression on the life of this young boy 77 years earlier.*

Lessons for today

Reflecting on the early beginnings of Methodism in South Australia there are two important lessons for us as we plan for the future. Within the Uniting Church in Australia the Methodist emphasis has pointed us to the universal grace of God offered to all, the need to grow in holiness and the possibility of loving God with our whole being or Christian perfection as Wesley termed it. Many early Methodists had little formal education; but they knew in their lives the power of God to forgive, to renew and to make them whole. This assurance of God's love working in our lives is the experience that so many people crave today.

Second, Methodists knew that, in order to grow in faith, small groups were needed. Therefore, each early Methodist was placed in a class meeting that met each week. These were led by lay leaders who were trained. It was in these small groups that our early Methodist forebears grew constantly in faith.

Today our problems may seem very different from the early pioneers who met here 150 years ago. We are concerned about the pollution of the environment, the decrease in the non-renewable resources and the fear of nuclear holocaust. But our needs are much the same. We need to be wanted, we need support from one another. We need to find meaning in our lives, we need a vital relationship with God. Life today is as uncertain as it was in the early settlement of South Australia. We, too, must walk into the unknown. And, in this walk into the unknown, the faith, expressed in such moving terms by Hosea, is essential.

Looking out on all the forms of idolatry in modern Australian society - the deification of money, sport or sensuality - our love for God, as expressed in the text chosen by my great grandfather, is sometimes 'like the morning cloud, like the dew that goes early away'.

But the affirmation made by Hosea several chapters later must also be our affirmation of faith for God still leads *'with chords of compassion and with bands of love'*. (Hosea 11 : 4).

The deep experience of God's grace and love that our pioneer forebears knew may be our experience today and tomorrow because God *'will come to us as the showers, as the spring rains that water the earth'*. (Hosea 6 : 1,3) This is the covenant with us. This reflects his nature. This is the promise I suggest John White left with the immigrants who gathered here 150 years ago.

REMEMBER THE MISSION TO THE NATION?

Thirty years is not very long but when one reads the recent account of the Mission to the Nation one feels without any doubt that it is past history that one is reading. (*Mission To The Nation: The Story Of Alan Walker's Evangelistic Crusade. Rex Mathias. Joint Board of Christian Education. Price \$7.30. Available at Epworth Books*).

The Mission was the largest campaign to which Australian Methodism ever committed itself. Launched in the Melbourne Town Hall on 8 April 1953, it was brought to an end in the same city four years later. It made use of radio drama, utilised modern advertising techniques and, especially in its early phases, enlisted a great deal of media interest and support. The Mission was addressed to all Australians and sought to bridge the gulf between 'outsiders' and those already within the church. As far as possible neutral buildings such as town halls and theatres were used for the launching of the mission in the main centres. Alan Walker's estimate, given in the summary at the end of this account, is that a million people attended the various kinds of meetings organised during the various phases of the national programme.

At the end of all this demanding activity there had not been, it is concluded, 'a mass turning to religion nor...a rush back to the churches'. There were, unquestionably, significant results in some lives and churches but the Mission hardly dented the rampant secularism of Australian life. In retrospect it is perhaps surprising that the Mission received the public support and co-operation that it did. Would an evangelist today get permission to address a football crowd during the half-time interval? To read of the yards of column space given to the Mission in the major newspapers is to realise how much attitudes have changed in the last thirty years.

The Mission was the last major evangelistic campaign organised by one denomination. Ecumenical considerations would affect any similar proposal made today. In many respects the Mission was Methodism at its best - evangelistic, and illustrating its capacity for organisation and for wide-ranging human concern. It was a story worth telling and Rex Mathias, the secretary of the Mission, completed this account shortly before his death.

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They are \$6 for one year and \$10 for two.

THE PAYMENT OF THIS MODEST SUM IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED BY SOME WHO RECEIVE THE NEWSLETTER.

If you come into this category you are asked to contact the Treasurer, Rev. George Wright, 26 Kyeema Avenue, Cumberland Park 5041.