

CHARLES COLE
BUILDER OF AGED CARE AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

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Charles Cole
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by

Dennis C. Nutt

The Conference of Churches of Christ in NSW will consider for publication short papers on historical and theological topics relevant to the development of Churches of Christ. The publication of a paper does not constitute an official endorsement of the view expressed therein.

The Preparatory Years

Born in Queensland in the year of the outbreak of the First World War, Charles (“Charlie”) Cole was the youngest of a family of ten children. His father, Edward, migrated from England at the age of 18, purchased a property near Mt. Whitestone, and met and married Catherine, the daughter of a local German family.

Charles grew up on the farm under very basic living conditions and worked in the dairy and with the crops. The age of the motor vehicle had not arrived in all its fulness so transport was by horseback, sulky or on foot. Refrigeration was the Coolgardie Safe hung in the breeze way, perishables were put down in brine or smoked, all bread was home-baked, ploughing was done by the Clydesdale work horses, the kitchen was a cookhouse with a wood fired stove, bathing happened once a week in the family tub with the eldest going first and the youngest, Charles, last. The radio was battery powered with a twenty foot aerial, and the streets were lit by kerosene lamps.¹

He attended the local Mt. Whitestone school and since by the age of 13 had been through the top 6th class twice, he decided that this was enough schooling and left to help on the farm. While on the farm he had a persistent thought, namely, to go to Melbourne to study for the ministry. He entered the College of the Bible at Glen Iris from the Ma Ma Creek church in 1934 when A.R. Main was Principal. He was nineteen years of age. While at College he met Beryl Nicholls, daughter of Jim Nicholls who was active in the Victorian Brotherhood Social Service Department during its formative years. Charles and Beryl were married in 1938.



Charles and Beryl on the occasion of his retirement²

Launching into Ministry

Following his graduation with the College of the Bible Diploma he had ministries in Victoria at Maryborough, then returning to Melbourne at South Richmond, which was a tent-making ministry. Charles ministered for three years to the South Yarra Church. Charles and Beryl purchased a house for £900 in Murrumbeena, Melbourne, where their twin daughters Dorothy and Gwenyth were born.

Charles then ministered to the Malvern-Caulfield congregation for five years. Between 1944 and 1946 he was Commonwealth Secretary for the Sudan United Mission where he gained administrative experience. However, deciding that a change was in order, he returned to the business world, first in a retail dairy business which proved to be eventful and hard work, and then as a real estate agent for five years, gaining skills that were to be of inestimable value in his later ministry. During this time he gave voluntary service for some years as chairman and member of the Victorian Social Services Committee, as well as the Christian Education Department. It was primarily during the war years in his ministry at South Richmond, a Melbourne inner suburb known as the “slum area,” that Charles and Beryl developed a real concern for peoples’ welfare. In this area he gained an intimate knowledge of people and their problems and developed a deep compassion seen later in his ministries. Here he gained experience in counselling, social welfare and case work.

The Move to Sydney

Cole accepted a call to New South Wales in 1960 to work with the Social Service Department as the General Secretary. The Department was then under the leadership of Will Roffey as Director. The Christian Messenger for March 1960 reported his appointment in the following way:

Owing to increasing duties on behalf of the brotherhood and great responsibilities, your committee has extended a call to Bro. Chas. Cole to share in a full-time capacity the administrative work involved in all our activities. We are glad that he has accepted this call and will become the general secretary. The present organiser, W.C. Roffey, will continue as Director of the Department.

Bro. Cole hopes to be able to commence his services early in May. ... With the coming of Bro. and Sister Cole and family to this State, his wealth of experience, energy, and dedicated service in this field will advance the cause of Christ in this ministry for others.³

How true the words of the last sentence proved to be. Yet, Charles Cole became Director of the Social Service Department in a rather unusual way. During 1961 Will Roffey retired as Director of the Department. He had gone to West Australia on a holiday, and simply decided to stay there. This left Charles Cole with the responsibility for the Social Service work of the New South Wales brotherhood.

When Charles came to the Social Service Department in 1960 there were only 28 people in aged care.⁴ Will Roffey had only just initiated the program. His successor embraced it whole-heartedly and transformed it from a relatively unknown welfare agency into a significant provider of quality aged care that included self-care units, hostel care and nursing home care. As Director of the Social Service CFA Homes Department, initially, he was largely involved with welfare, counselling and a limited Aged Persons Homes program.

As the interests of the Department expanded, his work became largely administrative. This involved presentation of policy to the Committee as a policy-making body, promotion of functional activities and training courses which in turn were being developed by trained personnel and others, supervision of a growing program of accommodation and services for aged people of the churches and the community. Used Clothing Appeals, visitation of churches and representation on inter-church and welfare agencies also consumed time.⁵

By Charles' retirement in 1983 the number of people in care had grown to over 500. As far as facilities went the following were added to the one small home at Pendle Hill: Bingley Hall, Croydon Guest Home, Pendle Hill was greatly enlarged, Forestville, Thirroul Retirement Settlements, Hostel and Units at Mayfield, Units at Coffs Harbour, the three-stage development at Green Hills, Maitland, and the Hostel and Units at Albury. These facilities constitute a multi-million dollar development in the three stages of care for aged people. Cole House, a sixty bed nursing home, rightly bears his name.



Cole House from Dunmore Road

But Charles' vision was wider than aged care. He did not forget the poor. To this end he established Opportunity Shops in various centres such as Lidcombe, Seven Hills and City Temple. These provided opportunity for local residents to obtain clothing and goods at low prices, but they also provided the opportunity for Christian counselling and the income was used in meeting the cost of the general administration. This mission to the community was extended through the establishment of Friendship Centres and Creative Living Centres in association with local churches.

Taking into account the limited resources of finances and personnel this is a remarkable achievement which to a large measure was made possible by the willingness of Charles and Beryl to go the second mile. Charles Cole's ministry was a team ministry with his wife, who for many years provided secretarial, book-keeping, counselling and administrative backup on a voluntary basis. This was in addition to maintaining their home, bringing up their twin daughters as well as providing hospitality to the needy.

Charles Cole was an extremely disciplined person both physically and mentally. He was a man of vision and boundless energy who discarded "can't" from his vocabulary. He was to be seen at his desk in the old City Temple building, juggling telephone calls on the two separate lines before him, and then jumping up to provide welfare assistance to one of the homeless men who frequented that part of Surry Hills. He was a "can do man." In the closing paragraph of his last report to Executive, he in many ways summarised his aim over the period of his tenure in the following words:

We need to keep in mind that all these activities are intended to be a ministry of practical service initiated by our Lord, sustained by the early church, and carried on in our generation for the purpose of providing care in such a manner as to win them to our Lord.⁶

To his already busy schedule, for the 1966-1967 Conference year Charles added the Conference Presidency. His President's message says much about the man and his mission. He had adopted the theme "Growing Together". He wrote:

As I have visited with you, shared in consultations around the tea-table and in other ways, I have realised more and more the significance of our theme "Growing Together", and particularly in two ways. Firstly, it is **important** that we "grow together" in every implication of the term, and secondly it is a **fact** that this is happening and is very much evident within our membership for, I am sure, there is a consciousness of the reality of being a Brotherhood and of the

expectation that this will find an expression in all aspects of the work of our Brotherhood...

If there is an experience that every person needs, perhaps more than anything else, it is the sense of knowing that they belong—to a family, a group, a Church. This is fellowship. ... When completely integrated, the total work of our Brotherhood can move forward with efficiency, and results will follow.

Let the Church experience and express this fellowship in its deepest sense and it will offer to the world that which people of all ages are seeking to know—that there is a fellowship, a family, a Church to which they can belong, and in which they are wanted, for their own sake.⁷

Though busy in his presidential year Charles Cole's leadership as Director of the Social Service Department did not suffer. In fact the Social Service Department Report to Conference for that year shows a great deal of planning and development.

A sweep through the *Conference Handbooks* shows that his involvement went much wider than his own ministry area. He was, for example, very involved with the youth. In a time when churches released their ministers to be leaders at the Easter and Christmas Youth Camps, Charles was heavily involved. Roy Greenhalgh had initiated the idea that campers should refer to their male leaders as "uncle". So, "uncle Charcole" became a well-liked and respected member of the young people's network.

He was a fierce debater. This author remembers his uncompromising defence of his position on the floor of Conference. It didn't always make him popular, but it earned him great respect. He was not worried by this, since personal recognition was irrelevant to him. Nevertheless, he gained it. The achievement of his vision was recognised on his retirement.

Charles served for a long period on the Conference Executive, the Property Trust and the Chapel Extension Committee. He acted as secretary to the last two. But there were other roles as well. At various times he served as a Chaplain to the military and for a period of time was one of the Churches of Christ representatives on the New South Wales Council of Churches.

Charles was one of the towering figures within Churches of Christ during the era spanning the 1960s to the mid 1980s. He lived in a lovely old federation house in Carlingford, set in an acre or more of fruit trees. This was his oasis. There he could relax, exercise, potter around and rake up leaves all before breakfast. There he dictated letters to Beryl who tried valiantly to keep up with his ever-active mind that always had a new project on the go.

But there was another side to him, as well as the entrepreneurial go getter. He was a man of passion, vision, great compassion and love who would pick up an intoxicated man, who had no where to sleep, and take him home to Carlingford and give him a meal and a bed for the night; supported again by his equally compassionate and caring wife, Beryl. This is not surprising as he fought hard on the Homeless Men's Committee for dignified and extended care for homeless people.

The "Retirement" Years

The achievement of his vision was recognised on his retirement. Perhaps the way people felt is best seen in a farewell speech made by a resident of the Mayfield Retirement Village:

I would like to pay tribute to Mr Cole, and express my amazement that he has been privileged to reach retirement! I often wonder if those who take up residence in Retirement Villages realise the work and sacrificial service which renders these places possible. During my association with Mr Cole—some twelve years—I have discovered his endless devotion to duty. I recall from the early days of this Settlement, he would leave his office at 4 pm, after a day's work, drive to Newcastle to attend our monthly meeting, and leave about 10.30 pm to drive back to Sydney. ... Such dedication enables us to enjoy our retirement. This is not a commercial venture—Landlord and Tenant—this is a dwelling place, a home, where we all contribute. ... The monuments to your work with the Department will live on.⁸

He felt strongly about social justice and in the 1980s supported the picket line in the wharfies v Patricks waterfront dispute. He frequently accompanied his grandchildren on peace and protest marches, revelling in their support in the fight for justice. It was this passion that led his daughter Dorothy into a social work career.

At the age of 70 Charles retired, but his retirement was short-lived. Sadly, Beryl suffered a stroke and after six months of intensive rehabilitation a sensible decision was taken and plans commenced for them to move closer to their family in Brisbane. Following Beryl's discharge from hospital and prior to moving to Brisbane, Charles ministered on a part-time basis to the congregations at Beverly Hills and Ivanhoe. Never still, and needing something to do following their settlement in Brisbane, Charles took up the ministry of the

Wynnum Church of Christ. He retired again at the age of 90, but maintained an active phone ministry to “shut-in” members until just before his death from pneumonia at the age of 99. His wife Beryl died eighteen months later, just four months off her 100th birthday. They had been married and served the Lord together for 75 years.

The Churches of Christ are grateful for the inheritance this good man has left. It is an example of purposeful activity, wide sympathies and interests, zeal for the kingdom, care for the aged, ministry to the needy and a sense of having known one who walked with Jesus.

¹ I am indebted to the *Eulogies* given by Charles Cole’s daughters Dorothy and Gwenyth at his funeral on Thursday 14th February 2013 for the personal information in this article.

² *Christian Messenger* 60.2 (1983), 1.

³ *Christian Messenger* 38.2 (1960), 8.

⁴ The residents were women residing in Ashwood House under the aegis of the State Christian Women’s Fellowship.

⁵ *Christian Messenger* 52.9 (1975), 21.

⁶ *Appreciation* from Bob Smith who worked with Charles Cole for some years.

⁷ *82nd Conference Handbook of Churches of Christ in New South Wales*, 3.

⁸ *Christian Messenger* 60.4 (1983), 12.