

Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society's

Historical *Digest*



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Singing in a Strange Land

The real reasons we do church history

Recently I was asked what draws me to study Churches of Christ history and why I spend so much time in such an obscure field.

Obscure?!!! I answered that I love the story of Christian ideals amid the necessary shortcomings of life and human nature. I love the hope that each generation brings despite the circumstances that try them. It is the story, over and again, of singing the Lord's song in a strange land (Psalm 137). The real reason we do church history is because living the faith with *our history* in mind brings understanding and hope. Let me elaborate with four good reasons for church history.

Singing the Lord's song in a strange land.

Collective history is the intentional preservation and interpretation of collective memory. That's how the story of any group is created – businesses, towns, football clubs. But there's more to church history. The church's collective memory affirms a way of life that stands apart from the society in which we find ourselves and from the powers that be. In every generation we are as a people in exile, following the way to God through the rocky terrain of circumstance, culture and contemporary thought. We cannot separate ourselves from the terrain, but we search for that 'in our midst and beyond' which we call God. More than a great story, church history affirms that we can and do and will again sing the Lord's song in a strange land.

Change and continuity in a tradition bigger than us.

History is the narrative of change and continuity in place and time. The church's tradition provides a pattern to the practice of our God-seeking and perhaps some respite from the present's pressingly narrow perspective. Everyday prayer and study,

weekly practices of communion and shared ritual, tie us to our history and to the ancient continuum of Christian practice. Liturgical innovation, be it thoughtful or careless, welcome or confronting, exists always as an adaptation to the greater and older tradition of Christian practice that is our history as a people of faith. As an example, the church I attend has a "sacred wheelbarrow" for special offerings: a liturgical innovation that is self-consciously humorous and financially optimistic. Wheelbarrows in church are quite new but its greater story, the story of Christian stewardship, is old (and unlikely to break under the strain of localised adaptation). Studying changes to practice in any time and place against the backdrop of ancient tradition and continuity can bring both ecumenical insight and confidence in the adaptability of the Christian message. History understood as change and continuity in a tradition bigger than us is a great source of hope and understanding.

We seek truth but we live by grace, not right thinking.

A third good reason to live the faith with our history in mind is that history grants us humbling perspective on ourselves and others. Church history is full of debate between people who sought the right path and dared to think deeply about our faith in many and complex ways. Sometimes their theologies were lived out in ways which aligned with gospel principles, sometimes not. Even though most thinkers have been good and earnest souls, they haven't all been right for all time – and neither shall we be. Within our own movement we once spent a great deal of time explaining to ourselves that Jesus didn't drink alcohol. Looking back, we got that wrong. Jesus did drink alcohol, but we were so wrapped up in the twin good intentions of rescuing people from addiction while preserving our identity as a people of 'the Book', that it took a century before we got our

collective heads around the fact. As God-seekers we pursue truth, but it is the alternative reality of ultimate truth we're after, not the minutiae of fact and doctrine (which is just as well really because Churches of Christ have always been full of independent minded idealists and we'd never agree).

So it is with us and other faith traditions. Historically we have found abundant disagreement between ourselves and with others over matters such as pre- and post-millenarianism, the nature of conversion, the doctrine of original sin, atonement theory and many other matters, each disagreement furthering the estrangement we felt from one another. Thomas and Alexander Campbell asserted that our unity with other Christians mattered more than any of this. History grants us the humble reminder that, in the great long line of people of faith who have gone before us, we can't all be right for all time - and that, as people of God's grace, it's not of ultimate concern.

History as light on our path. A fourth good reason. Our history grants us compassionate but unflinching insight. It allows neither our errors nor our successes to hide away unseen - though I might argue (somewhat advisedly given the cultural trend for 'leadership') that the church's greatest success is never truly in celebrated events and individuals but in the community's steadfast faithfulness. Certainly history can be used for propaganda - almost

every Church of Christ history book written in Australia before 1979 set out to serve the cause of denominational agenda. But our propensity to use history for the promotion of institutional growth and apologetic (something common to denominational history everywhere) is part of our history too. Churches of Christ's history books are a great read. Of course they are a source of facts and figures, but what they reveal about our sense of how we believed we were called to 'be' is so much more significant. Consideration of our past identity and action brings a chastening awareness to our present. Historical insight casts light on our path.

Church history - and Churches of Christ's own fascinating story - brings understanding and hope to living the faith. Denominational history casts light on our present path. Theological history humbles and reminds us that we can't all be right for all time. Liturgical history quietly asserts that change and continuity go together in a tradition that is bigger than any of us. Social, biographical and congregational history remind us that we are part of the story and that we can sing the Lord's song in a strange land. So read a book about Churches of Christ history, enrol to study or write the story of your community's journey in faithfulness. There are plenty of good reasons to do it.

Kerrie Handasyde

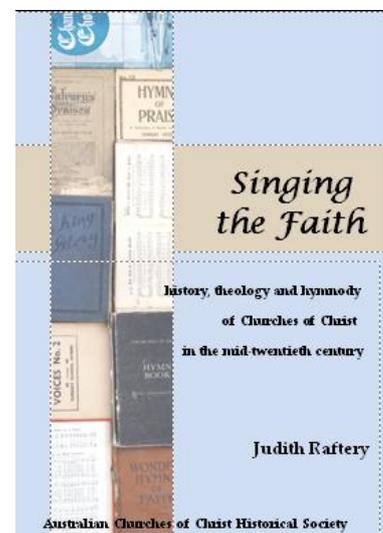
FORTHCOMING BOOK and STUDY RESOURCE

Singing the Faith

In the mid-20th century singing was a joyful and sustaining expression of faith - and the words we sang were powerful.

This new book from the Historical Society explores the history and meaning behind the lyrics we sang. Written with real warmth and a depth of scholarly understanding borne of years of study, *Singing the Faith* sheds light on Churches of Christ's theology and practice.

About the author: Dr Judith Raftery is an historian and Visiting Senior Lecturer in the Discipline of Public Health at the University of Adelaide. *Singing the Faith* emerges from her lifelong interest in theology, hymnody and religious history.



Chapel-in-a-Day Centenary

Preston Church of Christ, Victoria

When the building program at Preston became stalled, a bold solution was planned. What happened had echoes around Australia, as Harold Hayward explains.

In 1880, Preston, ten kilometres north of Melbourne, was little more than a scattered farming community. The improvement of roads and the development of transports systems, particularly the railways, brought with them light industry and urbanization. A land boom in the late 1880s was followed by rapid population growth - from 2054 people in 1887 to 3568 in 1891. However, the depression which began that year caused dislocation and hardship which affected the community for many years. By 1907, however, things were beginning to improve. An editorial in *The Leader* (28-12-1907) reported that Preston "so long fairly stationary, at last shows signs of waking up and claiming a share of the good things going". The establishment of Preston church has to be appreciated against this background.

In May 1902 a group of 17 "brethren and sisters" and some visitors met for worship in the Rechabite Hall, in South Preston. This congregation was formally organized as a Church of Christ in October that year with an initial membership of 20. In 1903, the church purchased land in High Street for a chapel but the circumstances made it difficult to proceed to the erection of a building.

In 1911 Preston was identified by the Victorian Home Missions Committee as a "cause" worthy of support. Under the leadership of Home Mission



Above: Thomas Bagley outside the completed Preston Church of Christ. The sign reads "EVANGELISTIC SERVICE every night except Sat. Missioner: T. BAGLEY". (Photo: Hayward family.)

Organiser/Evangelist, Thomas Bagley, a bold initiative was planned. Bagley's approach to church growth, tested at Paddington NSW, was simple: obtain a full-time preacher, erect a suitable building, assist the church to become self-supporting as soon as possible. In keeping with this, Bagley proposed the erection of chapel in *one day*. The plan was met with some skepticism. But Bagley had seen such an undertaking during his time as a student in the USA (1894 -1897).

The project took considerable planning. Bagley had some knowledge of building construction having been closely involved in the erection of the chapel at Paddington in NSW in 1902/3. But this job required more than the oversight of a competent handyman. To oversee the project, Bagley enlisted the support of builder Alf W Graham. Graham initially was also skeptical about the time frame but committed himself to it. The date proposed

for the erection of the chapel was Saturday, 23 March 1911 to coincide with the tercentenary celebrations by the British and Foreign Bible Society of the publication of the English bible.

Support was widely enlisted from the Victorian churches. A special train was arranged to take the main body of workers to Preston early in the morning.

According to a booklet issued to commemorate the event, the working body consisted of 70 carpenters, 22 plumbers, 30 painters and a host of general workers. The latter included 20 students from the College of the Bible, some of whom left the College at 3.00 am to walk the 15 kilometres to the site. Over the day as many as 300 persons were involved in the work. The construction workers were arranged into teams responsible for different aspects of the project. In the spirit of modern project management, the work was meticulously planned as the following report indicates: 'Pre-dawn: Building materials delivered to the site. 6.30 am: Volunteers putting in foundation blocks. 8.00 am: First wall up. 10.00 am: Putting down the flooring. 1.40 pm: All rafters in place. 3.30 pm: Roofing iron being fitted. Evening: Painting, seats placed. [Work proceeds by use of acetylene lamps]. Midnight: Project completed. Sweep and lock up.'

The completed building was described as 65 foot long, 32 foot wide and 35 foot high. It was lined, and fitted out with a dado rail and stained glass windows. It was capable of holding over three hundred people. All labour, of course, was manual and only hand tools were available. The work was done with great enthusiasm, *The Leader* commenting "Never was a building built before with so much good humour...The earnestness and enthusiasm were remarkable." (1-4-1911).

Large crowds attended the three services the next day. Bagley's daughter, Sylvia sitting with guests on the platform at the morning

service, had her dress spoiled when a drop of varnish fell from the roof! But that was a small price to pay for a splendid achievement. Bagley spoke at the morning and evening service and conducted an evangelistic mission over the following week. CM Gordon spoke at the afternoon service.

The project created considerable attention. On the day, many locals turned up to watch – and even lend a hand. The story was written up in *The Leader* and picked up by many of the national dailies where it was claimed to be an Australian first. More importantly it showed what could be accomplished through co-operative goodwill and set a benchmark for future church building projects.

Echoes around the country

The Preston project provided inspiration for similar church building projects. The feat was attempted at West Guildford (now Bassendean), WA, in January 1913 but defeated ultimately by fading light and workforce exhaustion. Nevertheless, services went ahead in the building, as scheduled, on the Sunday morning. A report in the *West Australian* (6-1-1913) reads: 'While disappointment at not having absolutely completed the building on Saturday was expressed.... congregations at yesterday's services were more than satisfied with the progress.' The morning service was conducted by WB Blakemore and HJ Banks preached at the evening service. The opening was celebrated with a musical evening on the Wednesday night and the last of the work on the building was completed on the following on the following Saturday.

Other chapel-in-a day projects around this time included North Auburn NSW (1911), Carnegie Vic (1913), Harlaxton Qld (1922), and Ringwood, Vic (1921). The joint Baptist/Church of Christ congregation at Port Pirie, SA, completed a chapel in 1912, and several Baptist chapels were also completed in a day.

Same team, different project

The success of the Preston project owed much to the enthusiasm and cooperation of Bagley and Graham. They became close friends.

Bagley returned to Sydney not long after the Preston project to take up a ministry appointment at the City Temple, Surry Hills. While living at Chatswood he became aware of some 40 members living in that area. As Conference President he drew the attention of the State Home Missions Committee to the challenge and was authorized to do whatever was necessary to start a church. A church was commenced (1914) and land in Victoria Avenue was purchased. Before leaving Melbourne, Bagley had persuaded Graham to move to Sydney to seek work opportunities, so he was available to oversee the building of the chapel at Chatswood. It was not possible to replicate the Preston approach but under the supervision of Graham, with Bagley and others providing voluntary labour, a chapel was built in 1914. The new chapel was opened in September but a few weeks later (November) Graham was back at work supervising the erection in a day of a Sunday school hall at Erskineville Church of Christ. He continued to make his building expertise available to the churches through service on the Conference Building Advisory Board. Bagley served at Chatswood until 1918 when he returned to Victoria for a second term as State Home Missions Organiser.

In November 1999 Preston Church combined with churches at Northcote, West Preston and Ivanhoe to become Northern Community Church of Christ - one church, several congregations - offering programs suited to different demographics across the region. The ministry centre continues to operate in High Street, Preston.

Harold Hayward



A group of Chatswood members in 1936. Alf Graham is second from the right (holding the hat). They are standing in front of a section of the original Chatswood church site. This section of the site is now part of the busy Chatswood Chase shopping complex. (Photo source: Chatswood Church of Christ)

References

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Thanksgiving for a Faithful Life

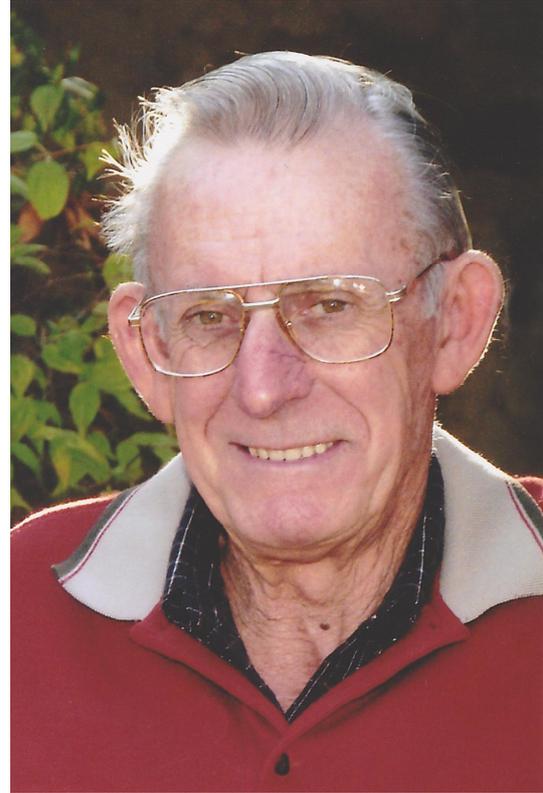
Don Handasyde 1934 - 2010

Donald Malcolm Handasyde was born on the 3rd September 1934, the 5th of six children to Gilbert and Nellie Handasyde of Wantirna South, Vic. He grew up on the family orchard at the corner of Burwood and Stud Roads; working, going to school and playing alongside siblings, cousins and neighbours. It was a rural childhood of fruit trees, dogs, piano lessons, tractors and chores, and Sunday's sabbath strictly observed.

In 1960 Don married Edith Martin, also from the Bayswater Church of Christ, and together they raised three children: Kevin, Glenn and Roslyn. In time, they had nine grandchildren. By Don's hospital bedside, in September 2010, they celebrated 50 years of marriage.

Don worked for his father and then in partnership with his eldest brother Gil until the 'home' orchard was sold in 1975. Don and Edith then moved to Chirnside Park and worshipped at Croydon Church of Christ for many years. During a period of upheaval in that congregation, they transferred to Montrose Church of Christ. While living at Chirnside Park, and later at Lilydale, Don worked for his youngest brother Russell - wearing a red and black Bombers beanie and talking football half the day from the top of his fruit-picking ladder. That orchard was sold in 1993 and Don finished his working life at Uptons' orchard in Coldstream before retiring to Croydon South and later, returning almost full circle, Wantirna.

On Saturdays, Don played in church tennis competitions and on Sundays played the church organ in worship - preferring the old-time hymns rather than modern choruses, and flats rather than sharps. Together with Edith he participated in Eastern District Conference and travelled to World Convention.



Throughout Don's life he had an abiding love of dahlias, growing up to 170 different varieties in the backyard. Many of the varieties had female names and some of those were shared with female members of the family: Wendy, Betty, Roslyn, Grace and Kim. Consequently, the family would often joke that Don was 'in the garden with his girls'. His dahlia growing was the perfect complement to Edith's flower arranging skills: a match made in heaven.

Don Handasyde was one of nature's gentlemen. His moral compass was firmly set from a young age: trustworthy and decent, kind and thoughtful to the last. Unfailingly humble, he would have been quite surprised to know that Montrose church filled to overflowing in October 2010 in honour of his quiet and faithful life.

Kerrie Handasyde (Don's niece)

From the archives this issue



Thomas Bagley outside the completed Preston Church of Christ.

The sign reads "EVANGELISTIC SERVICE every night except Sat. Missioner: T.BAGLEY"

Photo from an album prepared as a memento of the occasion and presented to Thomas Bagley. The album is now in the stewardship of the Hayward family.

The ACCHS exists to collect, preserve, make available and educate about the heritage preservation and history of the Churches of Christ in Australia. The Historical Society has extensive archives which are kept at the Churches of Christ Theological College in Mulgrave. If you have items relating to the social, organisational or religious life of Churches of Christ which you would like to donate to the Archives please contact us.

Historical Digest is the quarterly publication of the Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society. Membership of the Society is \$12 per annum which includes the *Historical Digest* provided by post or email. To become a member and receive the *Historical Digest* please contact the secretary or editor.

Articles for publication are sought. Send submissions, including biographies and church histories, to the editor. Obituaries and anniversary news are also welcome. Contact: history@handasyde.com

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