

BARRY ALLAN RICE
PASTOR TO PASTORS¹

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by

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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 Early Years:

Barry Rice was born at Box Hill, then an outer suburb of Melbourne, on 21 August 1940 to Horrie and Millie Rice. When his father enlisted during World War II, because of his orchardist background, he was initially employed harvesting fruit but was then deployed to the Northern Territory, and Millie returned to Castlemaine to be near her family. Towards the end of the war the family moved to Harcourt.

His earliest memory is of sitting in a pram and being put into a dogbox train carriage with his mother and a lady called Lucy. He recalled the end of the war, when people were dancing in the streets, the churches with bells rang them continually and the Foundry and Woollen Mill were continually sounding their sirens. It was a jubilant time.

He did his schooling in Castlemaine and Harcourt leaving at the end of what was then called fourth year (year 10) because that was as far as his school went. He did not enjoy school, but as the end of his school days drew near it did not seem so bad in comparison to an unknown future.

On Sunday 18 December 1955 he attended the night service at Harcourt Church of Christ. The minister was very late, explaining that he had just come from preaching at Castlemaine where four people had committed their lives to Christ. This had a profound effect on Barry because two of those people were his friends, and he knew they were rebels. That night he also 'made the good confession'. The following Sunday night, Christmas night, Barry was baptised. More than sixty-five years later he recalled coming up out of the baptismal water feeling so very clean.

Into the Workforce:

He began work with the Castlemaine branch of the ANZ Bank which was still licensed to buy gold. Barry, aged only 15, helped transport the gold to the Post Office accompanied by the Bank Manager who carried a pistol. Two years later Barry was transferred to the Box Hill branch. Young men in the bank were normally transferred frequently so Barry was puzzled that he remained at Box Hill for three years. The reason: he was in line for promotion. The General Manager of the Bank was impressed with him because a friend had mentioned to him that Barry was the only teller who called him by name without looking at his deposit book. This ability to remember names became a characteristic of his days in ministry. At twenty years of age he found himself second in charge at the Nunawading Branch. Two years later he was the Manager of a sub-branch at a new shopping centre in Forest Hill.

Barry made deep and lasting friendships. At Oakleigh Church of Christ, in 1956, he met and established a close friendship with the Farmer twins when they were members of the

youth group. One story from that time which is a presage of later days was that Barry often rode the local buses in the evenings (he was very keen on buses and trains), for he had realized that the drivers were possibly lonely and liked to have someone to talk with on their evening runs. He likely used these friendly opportunities to share his faith.

In 1963, aged twenty-two, he went to night school to study for Victorian Leaving Studies and Matriculation. The motivation was a question from his landlady three years earlier: 'Have you ever thought about becoming a pastor?' His response, 'No way!' The seed had been planted and Barry enrolled in night school because the Woolwich Bible College in Sydney required Matriculation for admission. However, with the responsibilities at the bank, it became clear he was not going to Matriculate. He had to look elsewhere. He had almost settled on Queensland Bible Institute when a chance meeting with a student from Adelaide Bible Institute convinced him that's where he would be studying. Had he Matriculated he would have entered Woolwich at the same time as his friend Keith Farmer.

Towards Ministry:

Barry resigned from the bank at the end of 1964 and took up studies at the Adelaide Bible Institute. He declined an offer from the bank of a new post at Head Office, certain that banking was no longer the direction for him. Still he was unsure which ministry direction to take, missionary or local church pastor. An experience in his second year refocused him. He was praying with another student when the other student suddenly died! Barry struggled for some weeks to come to terms with his friend's sudden death. Faith that had largely been head knowledge now became heart knowledge. In the struggle it became clear to him that he was to become a pastor.

His senior year saw him assume pastoral responsibility for the male students. He also applied to Kenmore Christian College in Brisbane, where he commenced in 1969 and was appointed student minister at Stafford Church of Christ. A college summer holiday ministry at Murgon, a small country town 3 hours drive north west of Brisbane, and a weekend ministry during the next year had a profound effect on him.

This small church asked him to become their first full-time pastor. They gave sacrificially for this to become a reality. With this congregation of dedicated people, the church grew under Barry's leadership. At Cherbourg Aboriginal Settlement, on the edge of Murgon, he had his first taste of cross-cultural ministry. And, it was at Murgon that he was introduced to using radio, with a fortnightly, fifteen minute devotional program on Radio 4SB.

Barry met Dorothy at Murgon when she was on holidays from Sydney, visiting her family who were members of Barry's congregation. Romance blossomed and they married at

Murgon on 29 May 1971. Inscribed on Dorothy's wedding ring are the words, 'Come, magnify the Lord with me'. And she did. Dorothy served the Lord faithfully with Barry throughout all their time in ministry.

Local Church Ministry at Ipswich:

Barry and Dorothy commenced a ten-year ministry at East Ipswich (now Whitehills) and Bundamba in 1973. It was at Ipswich that their daughters, Angela and Melissa were born. A few years into this ministry Barry noticed people in church were not connecting with what was happening in the service. With no models to follow, he persuaded twelve church members to experiment with contemporary worship. Rapidly this form of worship became widely accepted across the church. Barry reached out to parents who read the newspaper in their cars while their children attended Sunday school. They joined in a contemporary service at the same time as Sunday school and loved it. An evening service was added at Bundamba and two extra services at East Ipswich; six weekly services kept Barry busy.

He was able to enlarge his vision of ministry through a six-week study trip to the United States. He visited several larger churches and attended courses run by the Robert Schuller Leadership Institute, Evangelism Explosion, and Bethel Bible Study. Barry brought the latter back to Australia and implemented it at Ipswich. Boys' and Girls' Brigades were started at both centres as they had been at Murgon, and Barry became State Chaplain for Girls' Brigade. In that role he led Bible studies at the National Pioneers Camp and chaired the presentation of awards to senior members of Girls' and Boys' Brigades held at Parliament House in Brisbane. Young adult ministry flourished through evangelistic camps, drawing in people from Western Brisbane as well as the Ipswich region. Love flourished too: Barry was conducting an average of a wedding a fortnight in the early 1980s.

Local Church Ministry at Taree:

In 1983 the family moved to Taree Church of Christ. In that move Angela and Melissa were advanced a school grade and completed their primary and secondary education in Taree. Moving from the city of Ipswich to the country town of Taree was a culture shock. Some aspects of ministry did not work in the same way, but reaching out to parents who dropped their children off at Sunday school did, and a second service was commenced. Barry also ministered at smaller nearby churches at Wingham and Comboyne, often preaching at four or five services each Sunday.

Unfortunately, in 1987 tension arose in the church over the ministry of the Holy Spirit. The church agreed to become two separate congregations meeting in different locations. Barry went with the new church plant and had a wonderful ten years of ministry with

Manning Valley Church of Christ. Later on, the two groups reconciled and friendships were restored, but for those ten years the new congregation, with no buildings of its own, rented a shop in a Department of Housing area for office space and met in a school auditorium for Sunday worship and youth activities.

While at Taree, Barry attended a John Wimber conference who prayed over the crowd and then said, that if anyone had had a tingling in their left arm as he prayed they would be involved in setting up a ministry to the poor. His left arm tingled but he had no idea how such a ministry could be established. Shortly after a lady from the congregation came running in to the church office saying, 'Leslie's house is on fire! You'd better get around there!' Barry had no idea where Leslie lived but went outside, saw smoke, and located the house. The affected family were destitute. He took her to an Op Shop and secured clothing for the family. Then he took her to the Department of Housing where they said Leslie would have to wait six weeks for another house. Barry got quite forthright, asserting that he knew of four Department houses standing vacant. Later that afternoon he received a phone call indicating that if he connected the power, Leslie could have a house that day.

Word soon got around; if you needed help, go see the Church of Christ. The ministry to the poor was up and running. Donations of all sorts started coming in; activities were started to help people learn living skills, like 'Cooking on a Shoestring'; Major funding followed, enabling the construction of six long term accommodation units for women and children in crisis, and without consulting Barry, a local solicitor representing young drunk drivers assured a magistrate that Manning Valley Church of Christ could provide a community service alternative to a custodial sentence. Barry had 24 hours to come up with a plan, and he did. He recruited a divorced, aimless builder to supervise four young men to renovate the cow bails on a church family owned farm: a scheme that operated successfully for several years.

Opportunities for new types of ministries began to open up. Manning Valley church attracted a large number of single people and Barry created groups where they found a sense of belonging. He became aware of many people who had left Charismatic and Pentecostal churches, so he commenced an afternoon service where they could find healing. When some aboriginal boys started attending the night service but found it did not relate to them, he designed a service that did, and that soon grew to 35-40 young aboriginal people. He and Dorothy soon discovered that because their parents were often drunk, these young people were coming to church hungry. So a meal was incorporated into their service. Barry started a Thursday afternoon service for people who worked in Taree but lived far out of town. This made five services on a Sunday and one on Thursday, each service to reach different people.

Barry's use of the media, which began in Murgon, flourished in Taree. He recorded regular devotional spots for Radio 2RE and Manning Valley Church of Christ had a jingle that aired on that station. He filmed 'Thought for the Day' for regional TV and had a weekly column in the Manning River Times called 'Today's Good News'. One local businessman reported that Barry's column saved his life; he happened to glance at it as he was preparing to commit suicide and Barry's thoughts made him reconsider. Barry served on the boards of the Manning Counselling Service and a local Council Neighbour Centre. He was approached to stand as a candidate for the Christian Democrats for the seat of Lynne but declined. His commitment to working at Manning Valley church, and also distance from Sydney, was behind his declining an invitation to serve as President of Churches of Christ in New South Wales.

As if all this was not enough his heart for church planting yearned for fulfilment. Having been responsible for churches being planted at Redbank Plains, Forster and Manning Valley he contemplated applying for a one day per week role overseeing church planting for Churches of Christ in New South Wales. The night before applications closed he had a vivid dream outlining a church planting model. He applied the next day, was appointed, and carried out the role for three years.

Pastor to Pastors:

Barry encouraged people to think evangelistically and to be open to serving God in ministry. During his years at Ipswich, Taree and Manning Valley over forty people went to Bible College or into some form of ministry or mission work. He was also directly involved in training people for ministry; while in Queensland serving on the Board of Kenmore Christian College as Secretary, lecturing there in Old Testament and Practical Church Ministry, and in New South Wales setting up a Ministry Training Centre at Manning Valley for the New South Wales Churches of Christ Theological College. In this latter involvement he again picked up the friendship with Keith Farmer who was now the Principal of the College. They supported each other through some difficult times around then.

He concluded his ministry at Manning Valley, intending to take up a role directed at his work with students in the Ministry Training Centres at Manning Valley and Lismore. But before he started, the centres were closed due to poor student enrolments. This required a quick rethink. For several years Barry had been ringing younger pastors on a Saturday night, encouraging them and praying with them. Most were immature and impetuous and he demonstrated great patience with and to them. At fifty-five, with twenty-five years of effective pastoral ministry behind him, he applied for the new role of Pastor to Pastors for

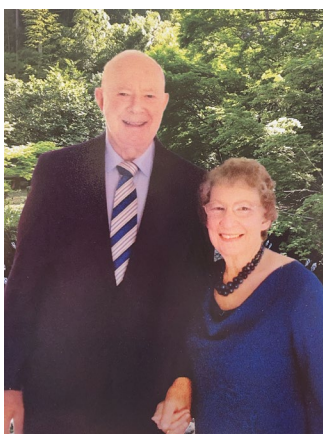
Churches of Christ in New South Wales and was successful, receiving a 95% approval vote from the pastors to whom he would minister in the future.

In this role he thrived, ministering to pastors, their wives and children throughout New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory. The ministry of pastor to pastors is a very complex and lonely one. It called for someone with special gifts which God gave Barry in abundance. He travelled long distances to support ministers and struggling churches and Dorothy supported him in this role, often being left alone for days on end.

There were two areas that particularly interested him. First, he was concerned for women in ministry who, he felt, often had poorly defined roles and were disrespected by their male counterparts. At one annual Ministers' Refresher he called male pastors to repentance for the way in which women in ministry were being treated. That was a time of healing for the women present. Second, he had special concern for those known as 'ethnic pastors'. Ministers from non-Australian backgrounds often took him out for lunch and Barry said he was thankful he did not know what he was eating. He built strong relationships with these ministers and established a network between them, bringing them together every three months for mutual support and to help plan future ethnic ministry.

Barry helped set up Pastors' Renewal Retreat groups and Pastors' Wives Retreat Groups in both New South Wales and Queensland. In conjunction with this role, which he did for ten years, he also carried out two Interim Ministries at The Heights Church in Newcastle, and at Coffs Harbour Church of Christ.

A New Direction:



At the age of sixty-five Barry stepped down from full-time ministry and began a half-time role at Auburn Church of Christ, developing ethnic and multi-cultural ministries, particularly with Sudanese refugees and Samoans. When he went to a barber in Auburn he started a new journey of compassion and understanding about refugees. His Iraqi barber became a good friend and they shared many deep conversations about faith. He found this both a joy and a challenge.

In 2007 Barry and Dorothy retired to Newcastle to be near Melissa and her young family and still be close enough to Angela in Sydney. At their new home in Maryland Barry enjoyed creating a beautiful garden where he grew over fifty rose bushes and gave the blooms away.

But Barry was not going to be allowed to retire completely. A year after he retired he was asked if he would minister at Belmore Church of Christ in Sydney for several days per week. He declined, but said that he would be willing to serve them for eight days per month. This arrangement, which lasted for two and a half years, allowed him to spend extra time with Angela, who was having major health issues during this period, and gave him the rewarding challenge of working in another multicultural church context.

He continued to preach when requested, mentor leaders, conduct Bible studies, and lead services at an aged people's complex. He and Dorothy found a real niche at the Grainery Church, working initially at Hope Café providing meals for the homeless and disadvantaged, and then later at the Missional Dinner. He had the privilege of baptising one young man and performing a wedding for another couple he had met in these settings. He also enjoyed being a chaplain on three cruises where there were many opportunities for ministry.

Heartbreak visited the Rice family in 2009 when their daughter Angela's health declined severely. She came to live with them in Newcastle receiving palliative care from them for four months until she fell asleep in Jesus. That was a very special time for them in caring for her. Often in difficult times Barry and Dorothy would notice rainbows in the sky. On the day of Angela's funeral, as her coffin was being lowered and 'Be Still and Know that I Am God' was being sung, a brilliant rainbow appeared overhead, an assurance to them that Angela was indeed with Jesus.

Four grandchildren were a delight to Barry: Thomas, Isaac, Maceely and Benjamin. Living in Newcastle meant time to spend babysitting them when they were younger and having the joy of seeing them grow and develop into the young people they are today.

Barry wanted everyone to know how thankful he was to God for his eighty years of life. When asked what he would do if he had his life over again he responded immediately: 'I would be a pastor all over again'. From his late teens Barry was keenly interested in the second coming of Jesus and was sad that many Christians show little or no interest in it.

Dorothy has given herself freely in supporting Barry in ministry. More than that, she made a commitment to care for him as his health declined and she has done this magnificently. He was deeply thankful for her support over their many years in ministry because, as he said, 'She was there!' Barry died four days short of their 50th wedding anniversary. He had few regrets about the life he lived and was ready to go to be with Jesus, with the assurance, 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain'.

Evaluation:

One of the younger ministers who Barry had mentored said of him: ‘He was the real deal’. Certainly, if any young minister was looking for a model to follow Barry Rice was an ideal exemplar. At his memorial service the same minister quoted the Fruit of the Spirit and invited the audience to make a comparison with Barry’s life: he manifested them all in his life and ministry. Those to whom he ministered saw in him the attractiveness and spirit and fruit of a life lived in Jesus. Barry Rice encouraged and inspired those doing well, and he did it with wisdom, energy and humour; to those needing correction he offered it with compassion and grace always speaking the truth and seeking improvement; to those in deep despair and loneliness he offered comfort, support and fellowship. Barry gave absolutely everything. There were no half-measures as he served the cause of the renewal of lives as empowered by the Spirit.

The ministry of Pastor to Pastors was convergence for him. He was in his sweet spot (the pastor ‘whisperer’). He was brilliant in the role, as many attest. He was a superb listener, with empathy and a deep pastor’s heart. He was a gentle giant. But he had real character and substance behind that caring manner. There is a passage in the Message translation in Romans 2 which is headed “God is kind but not soft”. Barry is not God, but this was his character also. He could have difficult conversations but always with kindness and gentleness; but factual and firm.

Barry’s contribution to the Restoration Movement as embodied in the Churches of Christ over those many years is of great and lasting value. If we may misquote the Apostle Paul: ‘Barry fought the good fight, finished the race, kept the faith. Now he wears the crown of righteousness which the Lord has awarded to him.’ He has most certainly heard his Lord say ‘Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord’.

¹ The authors wish to thank Barry Rice who provided a document listing his life and work, Dorothy Rice, Keith Farmer, Susan Irwin, Ray Cheal, Craig Farmer who made available material for inclusion, and Melissa Newman, Barry’s daughter, who provided the photographic images.