

ALF BOURNE
A LIFE FULL OF MEANING AND SERVICE

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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 views expressed therein.

Early Years

Alf Bourne was born in Petersham Hospital on 25 October 1915 to Frederick James Bourne (1870–1942) and Sarah Ann Bourne, neé Taylor, (1885–1981). His four younger siblings, two boys (Frederick and Edward) and two girls (Marj and Irene), were all born at home in Edwin Street Tempe. The home was a small four room dwelling built by Frederick, which was extended each time another child was born into the family. He was baptised at St Peter's Cook's River Anglican Church on 12 December 1915.

Alf attended Ferncourt Infants School in Premier Street Marrickville, which was the only infants' school in the area at the time. From there he went to Tempe Public School for his primary education. Like many of his generation, he did not go on to high school, leaving to find work to help support his family in the early days of the Great Depression. On 25 February 1930, aged fourteen, he joined the New South Wales Public Service working at the State Family Endowment Department as a clerk. This department was responsible for the administration of the Family Endowment Fund established by an Act of Parliament in 1927. He remained with the department until transferred to the Sheriff's Department in 1940, where he served thirty-five years until his retirement in October 1975 at the age of sixty.

Although having been baptised an Anglican, from 1920 to 1929 he attended the Tempe Methodist Mission Sunday School. He started attending the Tempe Church of Christ in 1930 where he was baptised as a believer by Arthur Carter. On a visit to the Rockdale Church of Christ in September 1936, the twenty-year-old Alf met Grace McIntosh Henry and began a courtship that resulted in marriage on 15 May 1943 and his transferring of his church membership to Rockdale. Following their marriage Alf and Grace moved to Bexley but continued to attend the Rockdale church.

Country Service: Hay

In 1946 Bourne was offered and accepted a promotion that required a move to the small country town of Hay. Grace's widowed mother accompanied them. During World War II, Hay was the location of internment and prisoner of war camps. When he arrived in Hay the last of the Italian internees had just been released, some of them taking up residence in the town and surrounding district. As there was no Church of Christ in the town the family attended the Methodist church. Their daughter Lyn was born there in 1948, the year in which he was appointed a Justice of the Peace. Because Hay was small, and the Sheriff's job was not overly busy, Bourne found ways to become a good citizen of the town.

Not given to idleness, he became involved with the Ambulance Service. The *Riverina Grazier* records several instances of his involvement with that service, which at the time was completely voluntary. He drove the ambulance when needed and on his leaving Hay, the paper records that at the Annual General Meeting of the Hay District Ambulance:

Mr Bourne was accorded a hearty vote of thanks for his work. He has done a grand job, and they regret that he has been transferred from Hay. His whole heart and soul has been in the job. The vote of appreciation said that they could ill afford to lose Mr. Bourne, who had been constantly in attendance on the ambulance service; almost daily he did something to see to the smooth running of the service, and he had had a lot of worry, as the vehicle was getting older and in such a state that the committee had decided to replace it.

Indeed, he had been the Honorary Superintendent. One of his most memorable emergency drives was going all the way to Sydney, which was 720 kilometres away, dodging kangaroos and driving down the wrong side of the road in the inner area of Sydney, with his hand on the horn.



Photo: Hay Courthouse, NSW 2021

Due to his association with the Ambulance Service, Bourne soon found his way onto the Hospital Board. On 22 September 1942, at the meeting of the Hay Hospital Board the president, referring to Bourne's impending departure, said that he would like to recognise the 'grand service' Bourne had given to the Board, coming onto it when 'things were tough'. In support of the president's statement, another member of the Board noted that 'Mr Bourne was able to visit the hospital frequently, and he would be very much missed.' In replying to this Bourne said that 'he had done what he could for the hospital simply to do something for those so unfortunate as to be sick.' He was vice-president of the Board when he left Hay.

He became involved in the community in other ways, such as joining the Hay Citizen's Band as a euphonium player. In 1947 he placed a Christmas Greeting from the Band in the *Grazier* in his role as its Honorary Secretary and provided the projector and slides used in the Annual Talent Quest run by the Chamber of Commerce: his life in

Hay was more than ‘to go to the office, turn the calendar over from yesterday and check the mail when it arrived’ as he once described it.

Before closing the District Court, on Wednesday 24 August 1949, His Honour, Judge Berne, spoke warmly and for some little time on the promotion of Alf Bourne, Sherriff's Officer, who was leaving Hay before the next sitting of the Court: congratulating him on his appointment, thanking him and his wife for many personal kindnesses, and complimenting him on the performance of his duties in the Court and care of the Court House. These sentiments were echoed by Mr Kelly, the Crown Prosecutor, the latter adding that Bourne was also an incredibly good citizen of Hay.

Country Service: Armidale

After three years the family exchanged the heat of Hay for the cold of Armidale, which was a quite different scene from Hay. A larger town, it had a different feel about it. The town was the centre of a Local Government Area and home to many education facilities, including the Armidale School, New England Girls' School, Presbyterian Ladies' College, and Armidale High School. It also housed a campus of the University of Sydney. With a population of around 8,000 at the time, Bourne spent more time on court activities than at Hay.



Photo: Armidale Courthouse, NSW 2021

What transpired in and with the courthouse was Bourne's responsibility as Sheriff's officer. When permission was sought to film in the courthouse and his own residence, Bourne agreed. The town was excited when the crew arrived to shoot a full-length film on Captain Thunderbolt. The *Armidale Express* wrote on Thursday 8 May 1951:

The unit will probably take shots of Mr. Alf Bourne's house behind Armidale Court House. Mr. Bourne is Sheriff's officer at Armidale. His house was

originally the police station here. On Friday morning if official permission is received, the unit will start shooting scenes inside Armidale Court House.

While in Armidale the family attended the Baptist church, there being no Church of Christ congregation in the town at the time. He was asked if he could help to nurture and mentor 11 child delinquents who were school truants. By God's grace, he steered them in the right direction, and they attended the Sunday school he taught at. They were shown a lot of love and good discipline which enabled them to mature and change for the better. His stay in Armidale was brief, just two and a half years. When offered the Sheriff's role in Dubbo he accepted the return to warmer climes as his wife, Grace, detested the cold. The *Armidale Express* announced that the family would leave at the end of March 1952, while the cheekier *Uralla Times* noted that the 'Sheriff's office has been tendered a farewell at Armidale, but never fear, another has been appointed'.

Country Service: Dubbo

Dubbo had been served by acting-Sheriff's Officers for almost a year after H.G. Glasson departed for Broken Hill. Bourne was progressing up the Public Service ladder, as Dubbo was a major regional town with a population of around 12,000, the largest population centre west of Bathurst. It achieved city status the year following Bourne's departure for Albury. The Bourne family arrived in Dubbo in May 1952, and the situation was not altogether easy. There were accommodation problems from the outset. The first few weeks or so were spent living in the Jury rooms at the courthouse until the family could move into the Dubbo Church of Christ facility. There was one other move while there, and the family had to negotiate three floods.



Photo: Dubbo Courthouse, NSW 2021

However, Dubbo presented an opportunity in church planting. With some members from the Gilgandra Church of Christ, he was part of re-establishing the Dubbo congregation. Several attempts had been made to establish a Church of Christ congregation in Dubbo, the earliest being by Charles Forscutt in 1888 under the aegis of the New South Wales Evangelists' Committee. Distance and the failure to locate a permanent evangelist in the town meant that the little congregation only endured for a brief time. Successive attempts also failed.

In 1950, workers from Gilgandra church travelled 130 kilometres there and back each Sunday morning to conduct a Sunday School and the Lord's Supper in the home of Mrs Ferguson. The school had an enrolment of 40 and a building was urgently needed when Alf Bourne came into the picture. While he was Sheriff's Officer at Armidale, he heard of the need at Dubbo and prayed that he would be sent there. It seemed impossible but the way was opened in a remarkable manner, and he moved to Dubbo. However, accommodation could not be found for him and his family, so the Gilgandra church decided to build a house with a large hall for meetings. The family occupied the living quarters consisting of two bedrooms, bathroom, dining room, kitchen, laundry. Later they moved into their own dwelling.

Bourne became the driving force of the congregation which began to grow. That meant he was hard pressed for assistance, and he made an appeal for young people who were setting up home to transfer to Dubbo to assist in the work. A number took up the challenge. He had Judge McKillop, a District Court Judge, visit the Bible School and McKillop highly commended the work and workers. By the time Alf left Dubbo, the church membership numbered 40, there having been 30 conversions. The church owned six blocks of land and was in the process of building a chapel and hall and seeking a full-time minister.

Towards the end of Bourne's stay in Dubbo, the State Governor, Sir John Northcott, proclaimed the Small Debts Recovery Act, which directed:

Every person for the time being holding office as or discharging the functions of Sheriff's Officer at any place specified in the first column of the Schedule hereto shall be a Bailiff of the Court of Petty Sessions or Courts of Petty Sessions held at the place or places specified in the second column of the said Schedule.

This added to Bourne's workload as he was required to act in this capacity at both Dubbo and Wellington. The next move came in 1956 to Albury for a period of eighteen months. There he was active in the Church of Christ, particularly with the Boys' Brigade Company.

Sheriff's Inspector

Following twelve years of country services, Bourne transferred to Campbelltown in 1958. The family worshipped with the nearest Church of Christ congregation which was at Austral, helping with both the Boys' and Girls' Brigade Companies. When

offered a promotion to the city office as Inspector of the Sheriff's Department, no departmental accommodation came with it, so he was forced to purchase a home in Ingleburn. So, it was when Austral decided to plant a new congregation at Campbelltown that Alf became involved and was one of its first Elders.

The *Christian Messenger* announced that in January 1962 some of Austral's best loved members would 'move to service in this new, and for them, nearer centre.' Bourne's administrative experience and leadership was freely made available to Barry Benz, a final year student at the Woolwich Bible College, who was to minister to the new congregation. Services were held in the manse garage until the unused Mudgee church building was transported to land purchased by the Home Mission Department directly opposite the manse in 1963. Twenty people, including visitors, attended the opening service on 21 January 1962. The family served there until 1964 when they relocated to Epping and settled into Epping Church of Christ. This was closer to the office, and more convenient for attending meetings of the Churches of Christ Home Missions Committee on which he served for twenty-five years (1960–1985). After ten years at Epping, Alf and Grace moved to Engadine fleetingly, then onto Belrose from where Alf helped the small Mosman Church of Christ. Alf and Grace finally settled at Carlingford in 1977 and resumed membership at Epping.

The inspector's job played a significant role in his contribution to the Churches of Christ in NSW. It required him to travel a great deal and in so doing he was able to visit and encourage many of the country churches, often officiating at the organ when necessary. For fifteen years he combined his role as Inspector of the Sheriff's Department with his service on the Home Mission Committee. His travel to rural towns where Churches of Christ had a congregation meant that he was able to assess the needs of the country churches and report to the Home Mission Committee. Consequently, the committee was able to act wisely and responsibly towards the country churches.

A Fruitful Retirement

At sixty years of age, in October 1975, Alf Bourne retired from the Sheriff's Department after forty-five years with the New South Wales Public Service. He was awarded the Imperial Service Medal by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth for Meritorious Service and received the award at Government House from the State Governor, Sir Roden Cutler, in 1977.

Retirement meant that he could devote more time to his church work. He extended his work with the Home Mission Committee; became the chief scrutineer for any Churches of Christ official ballot, usually conducted at State Conference; in 1981 accepted the role of Conference Vice-President, then President-Elect and finally Conference President in 1983. For his Presidential year he took the theme "Christ in You." Into his old age, Bourne continued to help struggling churches. The minister of the Carramar church recalls him coming to the small church to play the organ when he was in his mid-nineties.

But Alf Bourne did not confine his work to the local church and the Conference. He had a family and social involvement. For fifteen years, he played the role of Santa Claus at the Eastwood Centre and then at Carlingford Court. He and Grace moved into a retirement village in 1994, and after Grace's death in 2001, a week after their 58th Wedding Anniversary, he moved into Willandra Village. Another field of ministry had opened for him. He was already familiar with the village having done some voluntary work there. At this point he started attending the Eastwood Baptist Church with others from the village. Increasing frailty meant that in 2012 he moved to the Dorothy Henderson Lodge where he met up with Laurie Thomas, whom he had known for many years in Churches of Christ circles. Here he became a voluntary chaplain: a role he took seriously. He played the organ for services, and spoke at various others, and often went "missing," but the staff knew he would be in Fern Gully, the dementia unit, taking to the people and playing the organ for them. His chaplaincy work continued right up until he passed away.

Alf Bourne lived through some of history's most significant moments. These include two World Wars, the Great Depression, the building of the Harbour Bridge, the establishment of the Federal Parliament in Canberra, the 1956 and 2000 Summer Olympics in Melbourne and Sydney, the current health pandemic and Australia's first COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020 at Dorothy Henderson Lodge. A disciplined man, he rose at 5 am daily, valued dignity, and always liked to be dressed in a white shirt and tie. He was a remarkably generous man.

Alf died on 19 November 2021 aged 106, after a life full of meaning and service.