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# MAY ASHWOOD

AN INSPIRATIONAL WOMAN OF INNOVATION AND IMPACT



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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.

We remember May Ashwood best for commissioning and financing Ashwood House Aged Ladies Nursing Home in 1938 in Pendle Hill as a memorial to her mother. However, May Ashwood made a significant, long-lasting contribution to Churches of Christ by stewarding her great wealth for Christ. Her contribution to our movement was comprehensive and visionary, demonstrating the diverse roles played by women of faith in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Frances May Ashwood was born at home to Ellen Elizabeth and John Francis Ashwood at 1 Ross St, Forest Lodge, Glebe, on 18 November 1884. Coming to adulthood in the late Victorian era, May's life was saturated with the Bible and involvement with the Churches of Christ. Her family connection to the Churches of Christ began with her mother's parents, who were married at the *Elizabeth Street Church of Christ* on 17 January 1884 and worshipped there until 1894 when it became *City Temple*. Later, John and Ellen Ashwood joined *Chatswood Church of Christ*, much closer to the new family home in Victoria St, Roseville, where May and her younger sisters, Elma and Queenie, were raised.

May was deeply influenced by strong Christian women who went before her.

In the 1880s, deep resistance to formal roles meant 'women were largely excluded from formal ministry, preaching and church governance', requiring them to innovate ways of living out their faith differently from men if they felt 'called' by God. May's strongest role model was her mother Ellen, whose involvement with Australian Christian women's associations and voluntary societies culminated in her service to the *Sisters' Conference* as treasurer in 1908 and its vice-president in 1916. Some other inspirational Christian women in May's orbit included Mary Clapham, who established the *Sisters' Conference*, and Elizabeth Andrews, its first secretary; Elizabeth Bagley, who was the only woman in Churches of Christ to receive an Illuminated Address in honour of her service; Antoinette (Nettie) Thurgood, who established *Christian Endeavour* in Australia; Mary Thompson, our first missionary to India who faithfully served there for 40 years; and Rosa Tonkin, our first female missionary in China.

May might have also heard of renowned Scot-Australian Catherine Helen Spence, a Unitarian preaching minister, and Spence's fine example of how Australian Christian women could bring their voices and energy to public debate. Such a pioneering approach to women's roles in Christian leadership may be startling to us considering their limited formal roles, but the commissioning of officeholders for the 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Sisters' Conference in 1916 illuminates Churches of Christ thinking around the role of women in the faith ...

“The president, Mrs Fox, in her address, took as the subject ‘A New Testament Woman’, as referred to by Paul in the message to the Romans: *‘I commend unto you Phoebe, your sister, who is a servant or deaconess of the Church at Cenchrea, that ye receive her in the Lord, as becometh saints, and that ye assist her in whatsoever business she hath need of you: for she hath been a succorer of many and myself also.’* Mrs Fox proceeded to show from the words of Paul that women could advance and take a leading part in directing religious movements.”

Although reserved, May became faithful, strong-willed and focused, possessing a firm grounding and deep familiarity with the Bible. This was due to the cultural and social environment she grew up in. The Bible was embedded in Australian popular culture and daily life. Reading daily devotions and sermon extracts in the morning newspaper was how Christ was shared in nearly 90 per cent of households. Further, as Australia transitioned to Federation, the Bible was ‘a tool Christian citizenship in a plural, post-penal society’ – something that May took seriously across her life. In Australia, ‘churches and other places of worship also provided scope for leisure activities for women; [as] while menfolk had many other opportunities for social life, frequently denied to their wives and daughters, women were able without censure to use the church as a meeting place.’

Australian women mostly connected via private letters and scoured the major daily newspapers, ‘*Church News*’ reports on what individual congregations and denominations were doing, read sermon extracts, received visiting missionary news, and checked for church events, public lectures and fundraising activities. When May was just 16, she attended the 1900 *Oddfellows Ball* in Coolamon, wearing a beautiful cream satin dress with chiffon trimmings. In attending Christian events like this, May successfully moved from the domestic, private sphere into public areas of education, business, and politics, developing her connections across society.

As the 1900s progressed, May's deepening involvement with local Churches of Christ activities saw her enjoy a strong sense of community, develop practical skills, and make lifelong friendships within a wider trend towards public Christianity for women. This coincided with the *Australian Church of Christ State Conferences* establishing themselves between 1886 and 1914. The radio boom of the 1920s also enhanced the fast growth of the Churches of Christ movement, its 1921 census recording 54,000 members comprising one per cent of Australia's population. Whilst church services had become the most common form of community gathering in Australia, the influx of new members enabled state conferences to ramp up hospital visiting, social services fundraising, Dorcas (sewing and knitting) groups, Temperance movement initiatives, catering for the men's conferences, and offer vital outreach to 'isolated sisters' living in rural and remote parts of Australia. It also led to plentiful opportunities for the Ashwood family to steward their significant wealth with a Christ-like purpose by supporting the movement financially. May's father, John Ashwood, established *Ashwood Stores* in 1880. By 1906, his five-window flagship store on 827-831 George Street was considered the definitive 'Christmas windows' viewing experience and the Ashwood empire expanded into a 'mash-up' of Myer and Bunnings for Federation Australia shoppers: the *Truth* newspaper reporting in 1895 "... about the largest country trade done by any storekeeping in Sydney is that of Mr J.F. Ashwood, who possesses the most complete stock of groceries, confectionary, saddlery, ironmongery, crockeryware, general provisions, in the city... Mr Ashwood is [also] spoken of as a first-class employer."

When John Ashwood passed on 27 February 1921; his estate was worth £47,790 (approx. \$4 million. 2020). He bequeathed £1000 (\$87,000) each to the *Home Mission Committee*, *Foreign Mission Committee*, *Aged and Infirm Evangelists Trust* and £500 (\$41,000) to the *Chatswood Church of Christ*. Following his passing, Ellen, May, Queenie, and Elma continued the existing financial support John arranged, remembering him in 1922 with the following words, showing that whilst the family had great wealth, their hearts were postured towards Christ:

"In loving memory of my dear husband (and dear daddy) who was called home 27<sup>th</sup>  
February 1921:

Speeding away, we are speeding away,  
On to the region of infinite day.

Only a veil to be lifted, and then,  
Oh, what a meeting with dear ones again!”

In 1927, desiring a more permanent memorial to John and foreshadowing May's *Ashwood House* memorial to her mother some years later, the Ashwood women donated £3000 (\$249,000 in today's figures) to the construction of *Ashwood Hospital* and staff living quarters in Dhond, India. Ashwood Hospital officially opened on 8 March 1929 under the direction of missionary doctor G.H. Oldfield.

Outreach to India was a key mission field for Christians, but May's strong relationship with her maternal aunt, Clara Jepson of Baramati, India, illustrates May's sense of 'wealth with purpose', plus a flair for adventure: in June 1928, May and Queenie made a '...flying visit to India...sending from Bombay through a missionary, Mr Coventry, a five-seated motorcar as a present' to Ashwood Hospital in India '... for the use of Miss Blake and the mission station at Baramati.' May donated a further £70 (\$5800) to help establish a traders' school in the district. May's sister Queenie highlights the wider Ashwood feel for community service, the newspapers describing Queenie as 'a motorist with purpose taking invalids for drives in her Packard Six motorcar.' Cars, golfing, and walking were also great passions, and Queenie and May toured Milford Sound, New Zealand, for two months with a small group of their friends in 1928.

May developed a suite of important organisational, planning, logistical, and social-creative skills and capabilities whilst supporting City Temple and Elizabeth Street Churches of Christ across the decades. This helped her upon Ellen's death at 72 in June 1930, as she and her cousin, Charles Jepson Morris, were made co-executors of Ellen's will. £150 (\$13,000) was bequeathed to *Chatswood Church of Christ*; £200 (\$17,000) each to the *Bible Schools and Young People's Department*, the *Ashwood Hospital* in Dhond, India, the *College of the Bible, Glen Iris* and to her nephew, Charles. £100 (\$8487) was given to the *Sister's Conference*; £50 (\$4243) each to the Church extension fund and the *Christian Messenger Newspaper*; £500 (\$42,438) to her niece, Mrs A. A. Hughes (Baramati, India) and £2000 (\$170,000) to her sister, Mrs Clara Jepson (Baramati). Ellen bequeathed 52 Clarendon Road, Stanmore, to the *Home Missions Department* and 50 Clarendon Road, Stanmore, to the *Foreign Mission Department* of the NSW Churches of Christ. Following this responsibility, May's intensive involvement with Churches of Christ escalated. She

became President of the *NSW Women's Conference* in 1933-34, and, in 1936, she gave £7000 (\$689,000) to finance the construction and fit-out of *Ashwood House*, with building works starting on 11 December 1936.

Remaining single, May was a pioneer for women at a time when married women were known by their husband's name, and she notably pioneered aged care, since *Ashwood House* was the first aged care facility for Churches of Christ in NSW. Yet May's story is much more exciting than just donating the cost of building materials. She wasn't all work and no play and brought a genuine, lifelong interest in the care of women in her local community with a sense of fun – evident in her winning the prize of 'most humorous girl' dressed as 'Pierrot' at the *Silverton Fancy Dress Ball* on Saturday 9 October 1937, a philanthropic evening supporting the Silverton Parents and Citizens Association.

May's contemporaries celebrated her character and contribution at the official opening of *Ashwood House* at 3pm on Easter Monday 18 May 1938, one commentator saying ...

"Many eloquent speeches were made, expressing appreciation and gratitude to all who had assisted in the building, equipment, and furnishing of this beautiful home. It was impossible to mention by name all who had worked or contributed, but special thanks were tendered to the Board of Management of the Church of Christ Boys' Home, who had given the two acres of land on which the home is built, and to Miss Ashwood, who had built it for £7000. In a moving speech, Miss Ashwood said she had built the Home as a memorial to her mother, who had expressed a wish that her daughter should assist in such a project. Earlier speakers had stressed the fact that Miss Ashwood had not only found the money but had taken a loving interest in every detail of the building with the object of providing every comfort for those fortunate enough to occupy it. That this had been fully attained was amply proved when, after the official ceremony was over, those present were invited to inspect the building. Anything less like an institution could not be imagined. The dining room, carpeted, spacious and tastefully furnished, set the standard for the whole building. Individual tastes have been catered for in the furnishing of the bedrooms, with a choice of Vieaux rose, blue, green or primrose. The kitchen is a model of what a modern kitchen should be, and all domestic offices are of the most up-to-date character. As a speaker well said at the opening, the

whole place is designed for the comfort of the inmates and the ease of the staff: "Matron Chapple is in charge, and her aim will be to make it a real 'home'."

May Ashwood's contribution is an early example of Christian women's leadership within the Churches of Christ movement. Her drive stems from her mother's influence, and retrospectively it is astonishing to consider the counter-cultural approach May had to managing her wealth as a faithful Christian steward. Steadfastly supporting overseas and home missions, May generously gave her time and energy to many committee meetings and was deeply involved in behind-the-scenes preparations for networking events. Harold Hayward commented, "Once or twice, a few of us played tennis on her home tennis court at Roseville but didn't appreciate young people looking for lost tennis balls in her garden!"

Reserved, but offering strength of character and conviction for Christ, May ably fulfilled senior roles within the *Sisters' Conference of the New South Wales Churches of Christ*: serving on the *Ashwood House Aged Ladies Nursing Home Committee of Management* until 1958, and as its secretary and treasurer at different times. May was secretary of the *New South Wales Women's Conference* in 1933, on the *Boys Home Committee* in 1939-1942; *Women's Conference* president in 1940-1941; on the *Homes Co-operative Committee* in 1942-1943; and was elected by the Women's Conference to be their representative on the *State Bible College Board of Management* in 1941. May was more elusive in later life, yet no less respected by her contemporaries for her commitment to the next generation. After the Bible College Endowment Fund's creation in 1952, May initially donated £200 (\$7144) in 1954, then £2750 (\$89,000) in 1957. She also gave £20,000 (\$647,000) to enable students to continue training at some Australian universities, financing Miss Hilda Mackaness, M.A., (appointed by the Bible College faculty), to provide lectures in secular subjects. In 1957, May funded the *Ashwood Lectureship* for the Bible College. Ashwood House remained close to May's heart, and in 1963 she planted a commemorative tree in the front lawn.

May continued her service to Christ within the movement until her death on 12 December 1980, aged 96. It is believed that May's younger sister, Queenie Robertson, died in 1975, but we do not have a record of Elma Ashwood's passing.

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