

CHURCHES OF CHRIST NSW

Occasional Papers in History and Theology, No. 28.

a man born to lead

BRUCE ARMSTRONG (1937-2022)

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A MAN BORN TO LEAD

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May 2022

The 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.

Bruce Armstrong (1937-2022)

Bruce Armstrong, passionate supporter of the Western Suburbs football team and Woolwich Bible College graduate, ministered to the Caringbah, Belmore, Greenacre, Toowoomba churches from the 1960's to the 1980's. As Director at the Department of Christian Education, he was an innovator and champion for youth outreach, engagement, and education. Bruce was also an energetic leader as Ministry Coordinator for NSW Church of Christ (forerunner to the role of Executive Ministry Director).

The Early Years

Bruce Armstrong was the youngest of six children, four girls and two boys, born to William (1893–1970) and Ernestine (1897–1985) Armstrong. With a six-year gap before he arrived, he was the baby of the family. He, however, liked to think that he was the first of the next generation. While he was prone to boast that he was born under the goalposts of Lidcombe Oval – home of his beloved Western Suburbs football team – he was, in fact, born on 14 May 1937 in a private hospital in Strathfield. It was a difficult birth, and because his mother's health was not good at the time, he was cared for by his eldest sister, Carol, who had to leave work to care for both her mother and brother. She was only 17 at the time.

Later in life, Armstrong reflected that he did not recall any grandparent input into his life since his maternal grandmother, the only living grandparent during his infancy, died when he was three years old. His early life was lived in the context of a Christian family that reflected the strong religious legalism of the day. Cooking was not permitted on Sundays, even though they often had visitors for Sunday lunch. Bruce and Iris's children recall that they were not allowed to play sports or go anywhere on Sunday apart from church. Armstrong never had the heart, or maybe courage, to tell his father that the paper he read on Monday was printed on Sunday.

He was two when World War II broke out, and like the majority of his generation, the war impacted his family. His father served as an air raid warden; his brother Bill served in the 2/9 Field Ambulance being deployed to PNG (Kokoda Track) and then as a guard at the Prisoner of War camp at Cowra; two of his sisters served in the WRAAF in home duties, switchboard operation and the like, and the family experienced food rationing and blackouts. They dug an air raid shelter in their backyard in Nottinghill Road, Lidcombe. The war cost Armstrong the input of a big brother at an important time in his life.

According to his mother, when he started school, he could not see over the kitchen table. Berala Primary School was the scene of his early education. Then it was on to the selective Homebush Boys' High School (1949–1951). He left at the end of his third year, as many at that time did.

Into the Workforce

At 14½, he began his working life at Edward Hill & Co, Devonshire Street, Surry Hills, Sydney. The firm made high-quality furniture, and after 12 months as a floor boy, he was apprenticed as a cabinet maker. He remained with the company, which in 1954 made the Louis XIV bedroom suite for New South Wales Government House. When the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II visited Australia, she stayed in that room with the furniture he had helped to make.

Young men of his generation were confronted with Compulsory National Service. He served his in 1957 in the Air Force as an aircraftsman recruit minor. During that time, he faced a major challenge in his choice of vocation. He considered becoming RAAF aircrew, setting up his own furniture manufacturing business, working in his father's hardware store, or entering college to train for the ministry. It is no surprise that he chose the ministry. His family were heavily involved in the Lidcombe Church of Christ, his father being superintendent of a large Sunday school with 40 teachers. His mother was the church organist. During his childhood, the Lidcombe church planted a new congregation at Carramar, which involved his father in leading and teaching, as well as the physical building of the church.

On 3 October 1945, Bruce Armstrong made his confession of faith under the preaching of Arthur Baker and was baptised the following Sunday night.

Added to his church activities were others in the wider fellowship of Churches of Christ. The young women with the name of Morris, all unrelated, at the City Temple church started a young people's Christian Endeavour Society, which they called City Temple Brotherhood Young People's Society of Christian Endeavour (CTBYPSC, pronounced sit-bip-see). This society grew to be the largest youth Christian Endeavour Society in the Southern Hemisphere. He threw himself into it with vigour, becoming one of its leaders. Here he developed skills in organisation, public leading, public speaking, team building and relationships – all preparation for his future vocation.

Another element was the camping programs of Churches of Christ. Roy Greenhalgh, the Youth Director for Churches of Christ in New South Wales, ran several kinds of camps in various places. There were Christmas and Easter camps at Oak Flats (Lake Illawarra) and Bolton Point (Lake Macquarie). The practice was to alternate your attendance at the two campsites: Easter at Oak Flats, Christmas at Bolton Point and so on. There were also Missionary and Bible Study weekends. At a Missionary weekend camp in October 1957, themed 'A Life to Give a Life to Live', he decided to go to the Churches of Christ Bible College at Woolwich to train for ministry. One source of influence through this time came from the aforementioned Roy Greenhalgh, who was indefatigable, unrelenting, focused on leader development and committed to the Scriptures. This writer observes that he left a significant imprint on Armstrong regarding these characteristics.

The Woolwich Years (1959-1962)

Woolwich Bible College was a residential college. Besides its educational worth, the college was most valuable for significant character and leadership formation. This was gained under the wise counsel of Arthur Stephenson, a scholarly, gracious man and one of unpretentious holiness. The author remembers on one occasion at State Conference, when sitting in front of Arthur and Ella Stephenson, hearing Ella say as Armstrong made an appearance, "Arthur, there's one of our boys." Stephenson was a loyal supporter of Armstrong in his later public ministries.

His college career began with bringing his Intermediate Certificate to the Matriculation level. He found it taxing, not having done any academic study since leaving school. Nevertheless, he completed the four-year College Diploma of Ministry, which he received at the graduation service in November 1962.



Image: Bruce Armstrong with Sgt. Leon.

He added a new tool to ministry in 1959: ventriloquism. He purchased Sgt. Leon (Boys' Brigade) as a Jerry Gee Junior doll for 11 guineas. Sgt. Leon became a favourite wherever he went. Besides telling Jungle Doctor stories, Sgt. Leon got away with saying horrendous things about people. Armstrong derived some secret pleasure from being so cheeky. Iris was often so embarrassed by what he would say.

In 1960, Iris Flett came to college. In August 1961, Bruce and Iris became engaged and married in Hopeland/Chinchilla, Queensland, on 8 December 1962. Thus began a partnership of just short of 60 years in

ministry that only closed on 6 March 2022 when Bruce fell asleep in Jesus. Iris played an integral and significant role in his ministries. It was college policy to allocate students to serve in churches during their training. He had three such ministries: Fairfield (1959), Carramar/Fairfield (1960–1961) and Caringbah (1962) Churches of Christ.

Local Church Ministry: Caringbah (1963–1964)

Another who contributed to his life was Kevin Crawford. When Crawford accepted the role of Conference Secretary (the 1960s to 1990s equivalent of the Executive Ministry Director), the Caringbah church invited Armstrong to stay on as minister, an offer that he accepted. The church was growing with a large and active youth group. His leadership abilities came to the fore, and it was evident to many that he was destined for a significant role within Churches of Christ in New South Wales.

After 20 years as Youth Director, Roy Greenhalgh resigned in 1964 to take up the ministry of the Grote Street church in Adelaide. Knowing Armstrong's worth and abilities, Kevin Crawford suggested to the Department of Christian Education Committee that he would be a worthy replacement.

Conference Ministry: Director, Department of Christian Education (1964–1970)

In April 1964, the Department of Christian Education announced his appointment as Director, to take effect in January 1965. However, the Caringbah church graciously released him for the role from the beginning of August 1964.

On taking up his appointment, he outlined how he saw the role. He wrote in the *Christian Messenger* that he believed the prospects for advance were “tremendous,” that every department of Conference was straining to extend its work, that Christian education for every age was a must, that the Bible School was a vital tool in shaping the future, and that the youth must be challenged to the best in life, not with an outmoded, irrelevant balm for the conscience, but with the gospel of Christ, the most pertinent and practical message for the 20th century.

He then outlined a program of Youth and Junior Camps, Youth Crusades, Youth Conventions, a Youth Conference itself, rallies, training programs, service ventures – all holding thrilling prospects in themselves, all potential instruments for the advancement of the church. As he put it, “Potentially, every base is loaded.”

The first major venture of Youth Conference was the Youth Crusade. The Youth Conference was established to train young people in Conference work and to achieve some projects that could really be conceived of as a young people’s contribution to the work of the Churches of Christ at large. To this end, one Committee was “attached” to the Department of Home Mission & Evangelism and another to the Department of Christian Education. The Youth Conference Executive was under the direction of the Department of Christian Education.

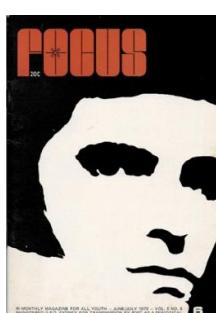


Image: 'Focus' magazine

While the Department of Home Mission & Evangelism tended to concentrate on work in specific churches on special occasions through a program of team evangelism and the current series of Youth Rallies at contact weekends, Armstrong took a different tack.

He ensured that the Department of Christian Education had a much broader vision. He set up counsellor training classes that sought to apply the training in a mission. What was to be a small evangelistic venture developed into a full evangelistic crusade. He enlisted David Mansell as the evangelist.

The directorship brought with it membership of the Federal Board of Christian Education. There had been disquiet in New South Wales about the content of the Austral Graded Lessons being used in Sunday schools, so Armstrong obtained reprint rights to edit and produce Standard Graded for Growth Sunday school lesson materials. These materials were biblically based and evangelistic in outlook.

He then launched into something that Churches of Christ in New South Wales had never done before. With the aid of an editorial committee, he created a youth magazine, which he called *Focus*. Produced bi-monthly, it found wide acceptance. Not yet satisfied, he launched *Youthquake*. This was a Saturday night rally held in the Greenacre church, which at times accommodated 500 young people. With bands, singers, and a sermon, it facilitated communication among the churches' youth across the city. This flowed into the camping programs, and the youth work in the state was vibrant.

Stephenson instilled in his students the need for "life-long learning." Armstrong took this to heart and, through external studies, acquired the Licentiate of Theology (LTh) and Diploma of Religious Education (DipRE) through the Melbourne College of Divinity while in active ministry. This meant that he was qualified to teach Christian Education and Youth Leadership at the college he had graduated from. It was an absolute pleasure for him.

He resigned as Director in 1970.

Local Church Ministry: Belmore (1969–1973) and Greenacre (1973–1979)



Image: Iris and Bruce Armstrong

Times were difficult financially during the late 1960s and early 1970s for both churches and Conference committees. The Youth Department was forced to sell the property where the Youth Director lived and reduce his wage. It was divine providence that the minister of the Belmore church resigned in 1968 when this was happening. It was a blessing that Armstrong could take up the ministry at Belmore in 1969, which provided a home for his growing family.

In 1968, his fellow college student, David Surtees, took up the ministry at Greenacre. While in college, they had set up with John Main a graphic arts side line, which they called 'SAM' using the initials of their surnames.

Graduation saw this disband with Main going to India and Surtees to Bowral. However, the itch to publish was still there, so Armstrong and Surtees established Essay Composition. This business was run from the garage of the Greenacre manse and was directed towards ministry. Armstrong joined Surtees at Greenacre in 1974.

The church had 92 active members at that stage, and his ministry was a tent-making one. When Surtees left to go into secular employment, the partnership was dissolved, and Armstrong Lettering Art, which sold Letraset, Art Supplies and did offset printing, came into existence. This was a partnership with Iris and lasted until he resigned to take up the ministry at Margaret Street, Toowoomba, at the close of 1979.

There was considerable energy, enthusiasm, and vision in the church at the time, and a torrent of new initiatives flowed from the fertile mind of Bruce Armstrong. The author joined him on the ministry team in 1975, also in a tent-making capacity, to oversee Christian Education. As part of the Christian Education program, the church ran an adult Sunday school class, a Bible study course called 'Tools,' which was replaced by a more ambitious program called 'ACTS' (A Christian Training School). In the ACTS program, lecturers from the Woolwich Bible College, and other experts in their field, came and taught on a range of

biblical, cultural, ethical, and philosophical topics. Several who took this course went on to Bible college and into the ministry. Armstrong taught in this program.

Two significant capital decisions were taken during his ministry at Greenacre. A new manse was built at the back of the property in which the Armstrong family lived, and in 1977 the church decided to establish a preschool. Significant Federal Government funding enabled the project to go ahead. It was a decision aimed at reaching needs in the area and developing outreach. One can truthfully say that his dynamic leadership gave the church confidence to purchase a house that backed onto its property.

At his suggestion, early in 1979, the elders made a bold decision to employ Migrant Outreach workers. They did not stay long for personal reasons; however, a seed was sown for the future desire to reach out to people from various nationalities. Around this time, English classes started for people from non-English backgrounds.

For the Conference year 1978–79, he served as President of the New South Wales Conference, taking as his theme, ‘In Union with Christ Jesus.’

Local Church Ministry: Toowoomba (1980–1997)

With 21 years of ministry in different forms – student, pastoral, Conference, and tent-making – Armstrong arrived at Toowoomba. He was to minister there for 18 years. During that time, he developed a new model of worship from within the context of Churches of Christ, which was a happy blend of old and new elements. He also developed a new structure of church governance that modified the elder/deacon model and revamped the way the leadership functioned.

He maintained a clear distinction between ministry and mission. Welfare work, aged care, and the like without an evangelistic element he called ministry; confronting people with the gospel was mission. Always willing to present Christ, he got onto talk-back radio through station 4WK to get the message across. He did this for 16 years, focusing on religious and social issues.

Church growth and church planting are a feature of his Toowoomba ministry. When the Margaret Street church became too small for the rapidly growing congregation, he oversaw a \$3.1 million building program to relocate the church from downtown onto 10 acres of land on the city's south side. The church now had 3600 square metres of floor space against 600 metres. The week before his death, the church paid off the loan for the building. As his daughter Jenny said at his memorial service, “It is poetic that he passed away on Sunday – the church is debt-free.”

As to church planting, it was in his blood. As noted earlier, his parents and elder siblings were part of the church plant at Carramar. Shortly after his arrival, he encouraged the Toowoomba church to plant a congregation at Withcott in 1982 and then a few years later another at Kingsthorpe.

But it was not all plain sailing. In 1992, he faced a tough church challenge to his leadership in a division that saw nearly 100 of his active congregation leave.

Ministry Coordinator (1997–2003)

A new constitution for the New South Wales Churches of Christ created an office entitled Ministry Coordinator, which now goes under the title of Executive Ministry Director. He was called to this role in 1997, showing the same degree of innovation in this role as he had in his previous ministries. He was, as far as the author can discover, one of only two men to hold two Conference Directorships.

Multiple elements characterised this ministry. There was a wide range of church planting, and a deliberate attempt to save declining churches was made before closing them; the line of least resistance was not for him. Conference programming and management were reimagined, and structural changes were made, not all of which have proved to be helpful. Ministers and church leaders were encouraged and supported, and he and Iris visited the country and city churches. He wrote a regular letter to all church leaders and

introduced a webpage to inform churches. He oversaw the introduction of the GST, FBT and the Blue card systems, which affected every church.

On the communications side, he introduced two new publications, one called *State-wide*, to report on what the Ministry Teams were doing on the churches' behalf. This came out quarterly and was in colour. The other, *Infoline*, kept the churches informed of what their sister-affiliated churches were doing. This was also a quarterly publication.

He introduced *Vocative* as a provocative stimulus white paper for theological and practical consideration among church leaders. He was never really a diplomat, he had to exercise diplomacy in this office, and he could rub some people up the wrong way with his drive and laser focus on what he believed in.

Extraneous to his normal activities, he managed the Stanwell Tops Conference Centre for some months before he appointed a site manager. He was involved in the aftermath of the Christmas bushfires in 2002, which saw significant parts of the site destroyed, and could boast that the refurbishment made it one of the superior conference sites in the nation.

Following the gaining of his LTh and DipRE, in 1984, he completed all the course work for an MA with William Carey University through the Pacific College of Graduate Studies. Due to a sudden ruling from the university's governors, which changed the thesis requirements from a theological to a sociological one, he was disadvantaged, having done his research on church growth from a theological perspective. He let it go as the growth at Margaret Street was demanding his attention. In 2002, he submitted what he had done previously, linking it to the practical outworking of the principles he had addressed. As a result, the University's Postgraduate Committee awarded him the Master of Biblical Studies (MBS).

Extra-Curricular Activities

In his long ministry, he took eight overseas study tours, which encompassed a range of subjects such as Youth and Christian Education, church growth and leadership, amongst others. He led some Christian Projects Tours where young ministers were given the experience of visiting churches in the United States and Great Britain. His tours took him to Singapore, Japan, Korea, USA, Canada, England, Italy, India, and Hong Kong. They involved observing specialist ministries, practical input leadership models, patterns of governance, modes of operation, methods of outreach etc. Four of the study tours were in conjunction with the Churches of Christ Senior Ministers' Network, a supportive leadership group for leaders of multi-staffed churches.

He saw Rotary as an avenue to engage with leaders from business and the community. From 1971 through to 2005, he was a member of four different Rotary Clubs as he moved through New South Wales and Queensland. He was awarded the Rotary Paul Harris Fellowship.

Sport was always something he enjoyed. When at high school, he was a member of the wrestling team. As a young man, he was an A-Grade tennis player. He was runner-up in the ACT RAAF Tennis Championship while doing National Service and was a faithful supporter of the Western Suburbs (now Wests Tigers) National Rugby League team. While he did not like a long sermon, a long service, a long visit, or a long anything, he did not mind a long innings at the crease of which he had few. Squash and golf were also part of his sporting activities.

Retirement (2003–2022)

When he concluded his last ministry in New South Wales, he returned to Toowoomba, where he and Iris became first home buyers at 65! But retirement was never a word that he felt comfortable with; he wanted an "active retirement," and it was. He became Queensland Conference Resource Ministry Coordinator and Director of the Intentional Interim Ministry Program, and Church Consultation Coordinator from July 2003 to June 2007. He stepped in as the Interim Director for the Overseas Mission Board in 2004–2005.

On two occasions, he did an interim ministry at a local church: half a year at Bellbird Park to prepare the church to move into Springfield (2004), and at Highfields, where he was a part-time Ministry Associate in 2006.

In 2013, when they detected the insidious encroachment of Parkinson's Disease, Bruce and Iris moved into the Nubeena Aged Care facility. There he began a Men's Shed, the activities of which he enjoyed immensely.

The relentless march of the disease meant that he moved into a higher care room in Numylo, the nursing home, on the Nubeena site, where he died just after midnight on 6 March 2022.

Evaluation

That Bruce Armstrong was born to lead became evident very early in his youth. He had that rare gift of never forgetting a name, so those who met him were always at ease. He also possessed a finely tuned relational antenna that stood him in good stead, both in his family and the wider community.



Image: Bruce Armstrong at home with his grandson, Daniel.

Possessing a wicked sense of humour, he used it to his advantage in his ministry, although it sometimes got him into trouble. This photograph of Bruce with his grandson Daniel as Sgt. Leon, warms the heart.

He was a strict father who taught his children to honour God, learn Scripture and stand up for themselves. His motto was "the strongest trees grow in the breeze." His children have risen up and called him blessed.

Bruce got excited about biblical truth, and he was tenacious in its defence. He taught that ministry to people and, most importantly, telling people how much Jesus loves them lasts long after you're gone. His youngest daughter described him as "an all-rounder," which is an excellent description. He lived so as to be missed.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My association with Bruce Armstrong goes back to when I was 12 and Bruce 14. Our fathers were in the hardware business, were friends, and sat on two Conference Committees together. Bruce once described our association as, 'We played together, we studied together, we camped together, we ministered together, and we got into trouble together.' All true! So, it is a sad pleasure to write this paper on him.

The major source for the paper is a ministerial CV that Bruce wrote in 2006 and which his daughters Jennifer, Trudy, Christy, Marty, and Kylie used in their eulogy at his memorial service. I have added a point or two of my own. *Ave et vale amicus mei.*