

Queanbeyan Uniting Church: 150 Years

Early Days

The Wesleyans (largest of the 19th century Methodist denominations) opened their Queanbeyan chapel on 13 May 1860. They did well: the public meeting to consider the project was held in the courthouse just six months before, on 14 November 1859.

Methodists had been meeting in the district earlier, both in lay-led “class meetings” for mutual support, and in services led by travelling Ministers, originally directed from Goulburn. The strongest centre of Methodist activity however was not in Queanbeyan but around Gininderra Creek, where pioneer Thomas Southwell arrived in 1838 and bought “Parkwood” in 1854. And even though he lived perhaps 50 km away, Southwell was at the 1859 meeting; and at other key meetings in Queanbeyan reported afterwards.

The support of the wider district was crucial in the development of Methodism in Queanbeyan. This followed from their Circuit structure, whereby congregations from Parkwood to Braidwood all supported and received services from the Queanbeyan Minister. When the chapel opened in 1860, Queanbeyan was part of the Yass Circuit. It was not until 1866 that Queanbeyan had its own Methodist Minister.

Peter Procter comments that the 1859 meeting “had only a few persons who were later known as Methodists”ⁱ. Later subscription lists for St Stephen’s Presbyterian Church show similar support from the community at large. That appeared to be typical in those days – perhaps more in the quest for public order and morality. Scots Minister Rev William Hamilton summed up the district in his 1837 diary entry: “the demons of strife and avarice pervade the country and godliness and charity are obliged to shrink into a corner”ⁱⁱ. The local citizens were understandably anxious to establish the public institutions they knew in Britain, often beginning with the Court House, and going on to Churches and chapels.

In any case the Methodist chapel was built, and it is worth noting that it was more than a restricted “sacred space.” *The Golden Age* reported regularly and in exhaustive detail Tea Meetings held there during the week to mark special occasions and to raise funds. The chapel was usually decorated, a meal was served, and several speakers spoke at length on civil and religious subjects - prior to the collection of donations.

Methodism in Queanbeyan did well enough for the chapel to be substantially extended towards Rutledge Street in 1867. Indeed, it was in effect a new and somewhat larger chapel: its original floor was two steps lower than in the earlier building, to which it was joined by an arch; and the earlier area seems to have served for a while just as a vestry. It has been easy to trace the external development of the buildings, but the internal layout seems to have been altered more often, and is harder to follow.

There were no major changes until 1898. By then, the Methodists must have felt well past the pioneering era. In their 1898 renovations the bell was moved from the fork of a tree to a proper bellcote on the roof, the earlier west entry door was bricked up and a new entry porch built on the east, and Carpenter Gothic decoration added to the gables. That established the Rutledge Street facade of the Church, and remained its public face for nearly sixty years.

Canberra

The selection of Canberra as the national capital had major consequences for the Church, as well as the larger community. The positives are still obvious, with new local business, hotels, housing and local government facilities. The Methodists extended their existing building at the rear to make space for Sunday School classes, usually held in the afternoon. In a spirit of optimism they bought land in West Queanbeyan in 1928, only to relinquish it later. Things changed, and not just because of the depression

The Queanbeyan Circuit was financially stable in the twenties because it had the support of growing congregations in Canberra. But in 1929, the Church's National Conference took responsibility for congregations in the new National Capital, leaving Queanbeyan and Wattle Park as the remaining larger Churches in the Queanbeyan Circuit. The Wattle Park building dates from 1882, and is just past Hall. It brought together a number of smaller local groups which traced their origins to Thomas Southwell or his descendants. Circuit membership became essentially small business people in Queanbeyan and farmers south and west of Hall; and although the Minister lived in Queanbeyan he spent a good part of his time on the other side of the ACT.

With the departure of the workforce which built Canberra, then the depression, the Queanbeyan Circuit struggled. It only survived with the help of a modest grant from State Church funds, three-day annual flower shows, and the Wattle Park Harvest Festival. Indeed, during the 30s collections from Wattle Park were sometimes greater than those in Queanbeyan. Without Wattle Park, things would have been grim.

This contrasts with Queanbeyan Presbyterians. They lost their Canberra connection in 1925, and had only the support of a fading congregation in Gundaroo and a small one in Bungendore. Despite selling some of their land in Lowe Street they could not afford a Minister in 1931. Only with substantial state Church assistance were they able to call someone in 1934.

After World War II

Queanbeyan's Church and community life were relatively subdued until Canberra boomed again into the 1960s. Once again the population increased rapidly, but its effect in the Methodist Church was not in proportion to Queanbeyan's expansion. Apart from changing community attitudes toward organized religion, many new residents were in transition, waiting on

Government housing in Canberra. A number of people transferred to Queanbeyan – as school teachers, for example - opted to live in Canberra; young people born in Queanbeyan but working in Canberra moved there, taking advantage of Government housing; and older people who were upwardly mobile moved over the border also.

Migration did not have a great impact on the Methodist Church either. Earlier migrants from Northern Europe and Britain did include new members, but later groups from Italy and Eastern Europe had other allegiances.

Nevertheless there was a new emphasis on younger people in the Church. Their new hall, inspired by Rev Merrick Webb and built largely by voluntary labour in 1954, was called the “Memorial Youth Centre”. In 1957, the 1898 chapel porch was removed, the vestries and present entrance constructed on the east side, and a Kindergarten room formed with a new eastern extension. Apart from a new toilet block linking the 1924 and 1954 halls, no further changes have been made to these buildings.

There was however a significant organizational change. The Church’s central authorities decided to make the Canberra region one circuit, including Queanbeyan, served by a team of Ministers appointed by the several Commonwealth States. The long partnership with Wattle Park began to fade, as did links with earlier generations of Methodist families. As described above, although the city was growing, the congregation continued to lose members to Canberra.

The interior of the Church building was renovated in the 1960s, guided by the Rev Jack Leonard: a “high church” Methodist. Anglican-style prayer desks were introduced and the choir wore robes for the next ten years. The congregation still put up with the uncomfortable wooden pews donated by Wesley Church Forrest when their new “National Church” opened in 1955.

The Uniting Church

In 1977, the Methodist and most Presbyterian Churches joined to form the Uniting Church in Australia. Remarkably – and certainly from the Methodist side – for the first time Queanbeyan was by itself. Like most places, it then faced painful property problems, since neither St Stephen’s Presbyterian Church nor the Methodist building as then configured was big enough for the joint congregation. The eventual decision was to focus on the Methodist building, which was reconfigured with modern seating for an extra 50 people. Some of the old pews were used by the Bungendore Wood Works to build new lecterns and a communion table. After a Continuing Presbyterian Church formed in Queanbeyan, it was able to buy the St Stephen’s property from the Uniting Church in 1981, selling their 1963 Church Hall to the Salvation Army in the process.

Queanbeyan and the Uniting Church congregation continued to grow, the drift to Canberra was reversed, and the old Methodist buildings became increasingly

inadequate. After much careful planning, the congregation voted with only one dissenting voice to proceed with the new building which now stands at the corner of Rutledge and Crawford Streets. It opened in 1994, and is serving both the larger congregation and the community well. The same is true for all the older buildings, and the “Jumble Sale” shed at the back. A Samoan Methodist group meets every Sunday in the old Church.

There has been one recent change: in June 2010 local craftsman Alex McFarlane designed and made beautiful new traditional glass and timber doors for the 1957 entrance to the chapel. They are a highlight of the 150th Anniversary celebrations.

ⁱ Procter, Peter: *Queanbeyan Methodists 1847 1977 : 1995 and updated 2010*, p. 6.

ⁱ Udy, James S: *Living Stones*, Sacha Books 1994, p. 28.

Paper prepared by Geoff McCubbin for Qbn Historical Society Magazine
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