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**‘Striving for the Mastery’
The evolution of a post-modern church in Queensland 1945-2004
(short version)**

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Drive for Baptist Visibility/presence

Baptists in Queensland emerged from World War II in fair shape considering the difficulties of the time. They were ready to strive for growth and eager to establish themselves as “the greatest Protestant church in Queensland” (HM Report, 1949). This was a tall order given the fact they were only about 4,500 members, in a state of just over 1 million people, and 80% their 60 churches were in the south east corner of the 1.7 million square kilometre state. But this did not daunt them as they devoted themselves to expansion and creating a name for themselves.

One difficult problem was to insert themselves into the many small towns and provincial cities of the state where the other Christian churches were already well established. Baptists were regarded as outsiders and somewhat odd with their requirement for believers' baptism and strict religiosity. Not surprisingly, they were sometimes regarded as a sect, a reputation which their apparent proselytising activities did not help!

Evangelism

Nevertheless, evangelistic work in the form of an itinerating gospel waggon was enthusiastically supported by the churches for a biblical period of seven years from 1946-1953 (See BHSQ Forum No 57 April 2004, pp. 3-6). While this initiative did not lead to the establishment of many churches, it certainly did give Baptists some visibility and performed a valuable pastoral function in contacting many Christians in remote bush areas. In the process, its most valuable function

was to give its Baptist supporters a boost to their morale and a sense of direction and focus in their quest for growth.

This valuable boost to confidence was no doubt one of the important reasons why the denomination rallied to the call of the energetic Home Missions Superintendent, Rev. A. H. Brooks who was appointed about the same time (in 1948). No sooner had he begun work than he set specific goals - specifically, 100 new churches by the centenary which would be celebrated only seven years later in 1955.

He warned, "We are having conversions, baptisms, and additions to membership and we are throwing the results of our missionary efforts away by allowing our people to drift into other churches because we have failed to see the necessity of having Baptist churches in every city and town and village of this great state" (HM Report, 1950). The first step was to aim for churches in 20 major towns. He called for better financing, more missionaries and organised a "Children's Crusade Army" to assist.

The goal of 100 new causes was reached, but many of the new plants were weak and poorly supported – only 20 became established churches in their own right, and even many of these were destined for a short life. But even so, the ratio of Baptist members to the population was only just starting to recover from its lowest point ever in 1953!

Baptist identity was something to be promoted, as it had been in a similar period of expansion half a century and more earlier - many church openings and pastoral welcomes then were celebrated with sermons on the virtues of Baptist distinctives like believers' baptism. The same values were held in the mid-20th century, although perhaps not so overtly but certainly as effectively - these were Baptist churches and they were the extension of the Baptist denomination through its ever growing Home Mission department (which ultimately controlled 50% of the churches).

Youth Work

Youth work was a strong ally of this process. A young energetic and visionary Youth Director had been appointed to a newly reorganised YP department in 1947. He proceeded to build on an already successful camping program, adding to it rallies, sporting teams, children's activities, musical programs, a bookroom, publications, training modules and other interests of a distinctively denominational kind. This created a tight web of fellowship and service in a denominational mode which typically lasted a lifetime and profoundly influenced the churches for half a century or so to come. However, at the same time, this strong denominational emphasis began to destroy the interdenominational Christian Endeavour movement which had provided an exceptionally effective training ground and source of fellowship for earlier generations. The denominational youth work never succeeded in replicating this valuable training ministry and this, together with its premature demise in 1980s and the failure of the Sunday School movement

soon after, meant that not only was Christian Education and youth work in a poor state by the turn of the century, but adult leadership was also undergoing a revolution.

Each year the presidents of the Union sought to stir the sense of denominational loyalty in their inauguration addresses which called for “Every Baptist [to be] a Baptist” (1951), or “The Baptist Church and Needs of our Day” (1946), and focused on “Our manifesto and responsibility” (1949), “The Responsibility of a Great Heritage” (1956) and “The True Spirit of Evangelism” (1950).

It was not surprising that on more than one occasion Queensland Baptists stoutly avoided official involvement in the ecumenical movement, although there was always strong support in some quarters for interdenominational organisations, especially the faith missions.

Theological College

In one area, however, there was some measure of restraint - the theological college had been staffed from its inception half a century earlier by a series of dedicated principals who espoused a more open, scholarly and liberal form of evangelicalism typical of their British origins. Although the college was small and struggled with quite minimal resources, it produced a stream of serious and thoughtful pastors who served with dedication and faith in often difficult circumstances and brought a well balanced and a fair mind to their sometimes prosaic ministry.

This situation was to change soon enough when this benign influence at the pastoral level was eclipsed from the mid-1960s by one that forcefully advocated conservative pietistic theology focused on biblical infallibility. There was a significant impact of this change well into the future. Even in its earlier stages, striking examples of this tendency were the tense departures and dismissals of several of the college’s assistant faculty who were deemed to be unsuitable influences in the new Queensland orthodoxy.

US influence

In the meantime, the moderate spirit was further sidelined as the crusade for growth and identity was bolstered with help from across the Pacific. Already during the 2nd World War, Queensland had been host to large numbers of US servicemen who suddenly appeared in military camps, on the streets, in the cafes - and in the churches as well! Many Queensland Baptists were awed by their vitality and their outgoing, natural faith. They were impressed when they learned about the seemingly limitless strength of the Baptist denomination in the home country of their national saviours. It seemed unbelievable to Queenslanders that Baptists anywhere could be so strong and so successful.

So when the war was over, it was natural to welcome a steady stream of evangelists, who added substantial strength a tradition that had already been established in earlier days, and brought it to a climax, especially in the outstanding achievement of the first Billy Graham Crusade in 1959.

The results for Queensland Baptist churches in some places especially was unheard of - it seemed like a genuine revival, the like of which had been prayed for over the years, but had never been seen!

AASS

This revivalistic influence was reinforced by the introduction of the All Age Sunday School which came just as the Home Mission drive had reached its peak. Expected as an educational movement to deepen the understanding of the churches, the AASS movement was instead promoted in its typical Southern Baptist mode as the greatest evangelistic tool the church had ever found. Besides this, it was the first time that a total program had been presented to Queensland Baptists, calling for the entire local church to be “organised and functioning” in ways that had not been conceived before. A large proportion of the churches turned to this new method, and expectations for it almost reached fever pitch. But it did not produce the results in growth and identity that had been promised, largely because its strategies and methods assumed an interest in the Christian faith and an outward religious expression that was more typical of the Americans than Australians. By the end of the century, few such schools existed and indeed, the whole Sunday School movement had virtually ceased to exist, at least in any recognizable form.

More evangelism and other American influences

But there was no need to worry. A steady stream of evangelistic efforts continued through the succeeding decades - ranging from the elaborate Missouri-Australia Crusade of the 1960s (and paler imitations in subsequent times), through the visits of individuals, a range of revivalists (some of whom stayed for a period), to lay renewal teams and youth workers. As well as the people came the schemes or programmes of evangelism such as Masterlife, L.I.F.E., E.E. and the like, while Australian pastors increasingly travelled to USA for study and to be inspired the vision splendid of successful church life that they found in that country.

In the Australian culture, most of the American schemes and ideas required considerable adaptation and high levels of energy to initiate and sustain. In some places, one or other proved to be useful, but generally they were soon set aside or a reduced version of the principles was absorbed within the overall church program, and so the distinctive profile was lost. One locally produced scheme that was of a much lower key, Christianity Explained, had a greater degree of success, perhaps for that very reason.

Eventually, revivalistic schemes were no longer as popular due to changes in the fortunes of programmed and mass evangelism, but the US influence continued at an even higher level with D Min level training and especially the mega-church movement with its packaged seminars, literature, videos, and panels of speakers, especially from California and Illinois.

This all helped to maintain the drive towards evangelism, church planting and church growth that motivated the denomination.

Church Growth Movement

In the 1970s the US was the source of yet another significant turning point for this process, in the form of the Church Growth movement. It was introduced first by visiting American experts, especially Win Arn, and then taken up strongly by local leaders. It proved to be instrumental in turning the thinking of churches around so that many pastors and other leaders came to believe it was truly possible to grow a large church - at least one that had several hundred members, which was significant in Queensland terms.

Disappointing numerical growth was a recurring cause of concern for Baptists in Queensland. By the 1970s, they had an inferiority complex due to their low profile and small numbers, despite years of evangelism, Sunday school work and hours of prayer, Bible study and faithful living. They needed convincing that it was God's plan to have the numbers, and that in the normal course of events, faithful sowing should be followed by good reaping. But it was hard lesson to learn due to years of pious rationalization of small churches and self-justification about the virtues of faithful but largely ineffective and fruitless witness.

Nevertheless the drive for growth and evangelism was strong and the Church Growth movement was adopted more or less officially as the policy of the denomination, and readily accepted in many quarters. It proved to be a vital influence in overcoming the mental block that was crippling the denomination. Churches began to grow in size steadily from the mid-1970s, to reach the same levels in the 1990s that had existed a century earlier.

However, by this time, society was in a process of radical change and a new generation of better educated and more optimistic young people had come on the scene. This meant that the churches also needed to look at their structures, ministry, worship and mission in a new way. A stronger force even than the Church Growth movement was needed to renew the churches and give them a chance for a fresh start. That force was the charismatic movement.

Neo-Pentecostalism

The neo-Pentecostal movement which evidenced itself in USA and elsewhere during the 1960s reached Queensland by the end of that decade and made its presence felt in Baptist circles by 1972 at the latest.

Various Pentecostal pastors from NZ settled in Queensland during and after the late 1960s. Their dramatically successful ministries soon became known in Baptist circles and in some cases made direct impact upon the churches. This placed immense pressure on Baptists to respond in some way. Later there was extensive contact and interchange between Queensland and NZ charismatic Baptist pastors and churches, and also with others of like mind.

Baptist leadership at Union and local church level in the early 1970s was strongly opposed to the Neo-Pentecostal influences, considering them to be much the same as the earlier examples of mainline Pentecostalism which had often been highly problematic in Queensland.

At the time when Neo-pentecostalism was impacting Queensland Baptists, a bitter experience with supposedly liberal teaching at the Baptist theological college was also underway, which exacerbated the negative attitudes of the denomination towards outside ideas.

To help prevent problems with Neo-pentecostalism, Queensland Baptist leaders circulated a report from New Zealand Baptists which took the view that the Pentecostal movement usually only held attraction for those who were imperfectly instructed in biblical doctrine and in places where fellowship and spirituality was defective. Hence the report advocated the value of the filling of the Spirit for a vital Christian life, but barely recognized the validity of charismatic gifts for the present day, and warned about the dangers of abuses and excesses on the one hand, and unsympathetic handling of situations on the other.

A special issue of the denominational journal issued early in 1973 printed some articles sympathetic to the new movement. The major lead feature was a lengthy article which firmly taught against the idea of 'baptism of the Spirit' in the classic Pentecostal sense. The article also explained that tongues speaking had psychological significance only as a form of emotional release.

Following this heavy treatment, the situation polarised for the remainder of the 1970s, but the pressure coming from the regular Pentecostal and newly formed charismatic groups outside the Baptist denomination became intense. Some of the non-Baptist Pentecostal churches grew exceedingly rapidly, and in the process attracted large numbers of sympathetic and curious Baptists to them. One completely new denomination grew 57 churches in 25 years, equal to 40% of the Baptist achievement over 140 years!

Some Baptists, fearful of Pentecostalism and the changes it introduced, reacted strenuously against it, citing biblical reasons which should have made a strong appeal in the Queensland context. Others who did not wish to be involved personally were nevertheless impressed by the outstanding growth of these churches. Some pastors longed for the empowerment in their ministries that they saw, and others were hankering after the freedom of worship and spiritual revival that they heard about. Overall, Baptists were overwhelmed by the dramatic power and strength of the charismatic churches, and many not so secretly longed to see the process replicated amongst themselves.

Cultural changes

In these heady days of the 70s, young people, especially students, were strongly attracted to the new and vibrant life of charismatic churches. In the freer religious and cultural climate of the times, they had few problems in associating directly with this exciting new stream of Christian

life. Many in the older generations were also ready for a new approach to their personal and church lives, being prepared to exchange their long held traditions of formal well structured but often rather sterile services and institutionalised church activities for a spirituality that gave them new meaning and the promise of liberty and empowerment.

There was also a process of generational change taking place amongst the lay leadership of the churches and their pastors. During this and later periods, many pastors were not content with the quiet unassuming style of ministry often displayed by their predecessors. Instead they were far more intentional and entrepreneurial leaders, who could see the promise of large churches as tools to advance the mission of the church.

Body Life

There were further inter-related trends that help advance this general mood of change and provided the dynamic for it, both of which once again from North America. From the late 1970s onwards, Queensland churches began to adopt the “body life” ministry which promoted the use of small groups, the ministry of every member through the active use of spiritual gifts by lay people and the restructuring of the church, its ministry and worship to enhance these developments. The NZ influence was important in succeeding years as Queenslanders learned from visiting pastors and also travelled to that country to see first hand how churches there had been revolutionised by the adoption of these ideas.

To centre the life of the church on a house-group and to assign to them the chief responsibility for the delivery of pastoral care and Bible teaching meant that lay people were able to relate to each other face to face thus fostering fellowship and the exercise of the individuals ministry gifts within an informal and strongly relational setting. This soon produced flow on effects for the role of the pastor, the nature of the Sunday worship and the leadership and administration of the churches and the design of buildings.

The necessity for the use of gifts by each person for this kind of ministry inevitably threw the focus onto the burgeoning neo-pentecostal movement which was by now beginning to revolutionise the Australian religious profile.

Charismatic Movement

The official attitude of the Baptist denomination was still strictly opposed to Pentecostalism, so at first the movement made little headway in the churches. Instead polarisation and hostility increased. However, several key leaders began to take a new approach because they were so strongly impressed by the apparent value of the new movement as a means of producing spiritual renewal and especially for evangelism and church growth.

Prejudices continued to dissolve also when trusted denominational and other respected leaders began to show unmistakable (albeit cautious) signs of acceptance of the charismatic ideas. An

important crisis point was reached when in the early 1980s the denomination appointed as General Superintendent a minister from NZ, where it was known that the charismatic movement had been accepted more widely than Queensland with generally positive results. His appointment did mark a change in official attitude, and galvanized the churches. A new report on the movement issued at this time was also far less negative, at least to the milder forms of the movement.

This cautious acceptance of the movement was bolstered strongly through the appointment of another key denominational leader who had spent a few years in the late 1970s as a missionary in the Solomon Islands where he had come in first hand contact with an intense form of spirituality typical of the area. It was not long before he began to work towards replicating what he had encountered in the Pacific, aiming for revival in Queensland through conferences, shared ministries with the Islanders and visits by Queensland pastors and other who came enthused with what they saw and determined to promote this spirituality.

Renewal and the mega-church

The acceptance of charismatic ideas continued as different phases of the renewal appeared, including most noticeably the Signs and Wonders movement of John Wimber, the Toronto Blessing, the Prosperity gospel and apostolic leadership, which affected Baptists in varying degrees.

In due course, some churches which had adopted charismatic practices had grown dramatically and demonstrated unmistakable renewal of Christian life and worship yet without any serious problems, at least in the long term. Thus the charismatic movement, with the accompanying 'body life' ministry and Church Growth theory was seen to produce the outcomes of evangelism and spiritual growth so highly valued over the years by Queensland Baptists. The milder form of Pentecostalism that it reflected resonated with the type of pietistic revival that Baptists had long prayed for, and which a strong background in Keswick holiness teaching had anticipated.

By the 1990s, the US mega-church movement was developing strongly and as it made its way to Queensland, it provided additional methodology and further legitimation for the growth of churches. Thus the pathway was opened up for rapid growth in the number of larger churches so that as the end of the millennium approached the average size of churches returned to the 90s where it had been a century before and the proportion of larger churches recovered from the post-war slump to reach the 40% mark once again.

Change or die

Perhaps no more than 10% churches moved fully into the charismatic or 'renewal' stream, in some cases with extremes of expression, but some were high profile and thus very influential. Others followed along more distantly. There were of course many that were either unimpressed

or openly resistant. However, in only a few cases did non-Charismatic churches register any substantial growth.

Nevertheless, with contemporary society moving rapidly towards a post-Christian and post-modern condition, the structures, methods and spirit of the traditional church seemed more and more untenable in the light of the Baptist passion to evangelise their state and cover it with churches. In this context, the sense of renewal, freedom, purpose and flexibility unleashed by Charismatic and mega-church movements, led to constant repetition by the leadership of the mantra, 'change or die.'

However the transition was not altogether smooth, and well into the 1990s there were still reports of conflict and serious problems in the churches. The 1990s was a turbulent era at the denominational level with continual structural change and severe disturbances over personalities.

At the end of the 1990s the legacy of 25 years of almost continuous instability showed up in a damning report of a consultant appointed as part of comprehensive review process. This report for the new millennium, promoted as expressive of the grass-roots perceptions, spoke of widespread loss of identity and ignorance of Baptist principles, growth from transfers out of other churches (not conversions) and the deliberate toning down of Baptist distinctives 'so as not to be offensive' with a view to 'gain[ing] further numbers', excessive focus on success defined numerically, fragmentation, little accountability and a bunker mentality on the part of individual churches.

The Contemporary Post-Modern church

However, as the end of the millennium drew closer, it was apparent that another change was underway. The charismatic movement had begun to lose its intensity, even in non-Baptist areas. But as the original impetus of the charismatic movement and cultural changes subsided, it was clear that many of the obstacles to change had been overcome, and conditions had been created which allowed for wide-ranging innovation, experimentation and variety in the churches. The growing churches were recognized to be the ones that had taken the challenge to 'change or die'. The focus was still evangelism and church growth, but this mission could now be carried out in contemporary form and style.

This 'contemporary' style expressed itself in informal worship designed to attract non-churched people which focused heavily on modern music, the use of technology and using drama and visuals to communicate the message. The churches were restructured under the aegis of finely focused vision, mission and purpose statements for efficiency, often with much stronger powers of decision-making given to the pastoral and lay leadership which resulted in a palpable sense of detachment from the life of the church on the part of those who had formerly been its most active supporters.

Changes of this kind affected even non-charismatic churches (only a few were untouched by them and they were often identified as static or declining). There were corresponding structural changes at the state level and “Queensland Baptists” (as the new-look Baptist Union was now styled), had become a post-modern denomination, with a low key approach to structures and beliefs and focusing its attention facilitating the ‘health’ of its members through ministry networks.

Many followed this pattern - making evangelism and church growth their primary, even exclusive goal. As one leader put it, it was necessary to "to view the church as ‘Mission’ and develop the NT attitude to support of and involvement in the mission of Christ to the world" (REC 1999).

In many cases churches were successful in this goal and attendances soared as the churches developed a multiplicity of ministries. This was particularly obvious in some new suburban, regional and resort areas as newcomers flocking into the community were drawn into the life of the churches. Included in these new attendees were people from other denominations who would not have felt comfortable with the revivalistic evangelism and the push for Baptist identity of an earlier period.

Baptist churches became distinguished as those which had a middle of the road contemporary worship style, a well-led and focused mission which drew them into the community and resulted in lively and relevant programs of ministry for the family, and a simple Bible-based conservative theology.

This produced the growth that the earlier generations had long sought, and so a new style of Baptist crusade had emerged, but at considerable cost to the traditional denominational distinctives - believer's baptism, church membership and congregational government included. As the millennium report stated, there was fear that ‘important underlying beliefs and values may have been sacrificed.’

Statistics revealed the situation as it had developed – membership did not increase but the numbers of those claiming Baptist affiliation through Census reports jumped dramatically.

So the charismatic movement had been powerful enough to loosen up the churches which had tended to become institutionalised, formal and inward looking so that dramatic changes like this could take place.

However, the distinctive charismatic characteristics which had once been so divisive and controversial had been largely put on one side in favour of the contemporary style which, it was widely agreed, was purely a pragmatic matter without any theological implications or basis.

However, the overall success of the transition seemed to prove Peter Wagner's point made in his 1973 book, “Look out the Pentecostals are coming”, that it was possible to restructure and

refocus the church for growth in the way that the Latin American Pentecostals had done with their adventurous evangelism, church multiplication, localised training, dynamic worship and body life, without necessarily adopting their particular doctrines. However, what was easy to overlook was that such a radical transformation and such courageous and visionary ministry initiatives were not possible without a powerful spiritual experience to energise them. Furthermore, when this process was followed, so much of the historic content of Baptist life had been lost in the process that there was a danger than the churches were in danger of losing their integrity.

Nevertheless, the younger generation accepted this situation as the norm, some were in fact already moving on to the next phase of a fully post-modern 'liquid' emerging church.

A Conclusion – a New Orthopraxy

As the new millennium dawned on the post-modern Baptists of Queensland, with their new look churches and denominational networks, there appeared to be a fresh issue emerging issue - there was a new form, but it was quickly developing into another tradition. So in the latest exercise in denominational restructuring and revisioning, completed only in 2001, a new mantra appeared, 'growing healthy churches'. But unless substantial content and meaning can be given to this concept, it seems the Baptists of Queensland may be destined to embark on yet another round of the cycle that they have experienced over the last 50 years. They have been offered the taste of God's power, but seem to fall back so easily again to strive for the mastery themselves. If it is true that a Baptist church with its strong view of regenerate membership is more than any other only a generation away from extinction, and thus is totally dependent on energetic evangelism for its survival, then perhaps there is nothing else for it!