

CENTENARY OF WESLEY UNITING CHURCH, ARMIDALE

1893 - 1993

In September, 1892, the Methodist newspaper reported that "the trustees of the Armidale Church property met in the vestry of the church to consider whether, in the face of the dull times, they were justified in going on with their long-projected plan of building a new church." The decision to proceed was unanimous and the tender of Mr Edward Sharp, for 2000 pounds or thereabouts, was accepted. Over the next few months the work proceeded, and on Sunday, 23rd July, 1893, the new church building was opened and dedicated.

The Methodist cause in Armidale had begun with a service held in the Court House in 1859. Within a few years the first church had been built (in 1864), and it stands today as the oldest surviving church building in this city. A few years ago a plaque was placed on the building to commemorate the fact. Over the next twenty-odd years, the Methodist work in Armidale was maintained, somewhat precariously at times, and uncomfortably positioned, in the words of the Rev J.E. Carruthers, "between aristocratic episcopacy and entrenched Presbyterianism". It was the vigorous leadership and inspiring evangelism of Mr Carruthers in the mid-1880s that helped to create the demand for the new building, as membership increased.

For much of the time Uralla was also part of the Armidale circuit, and at one stage an attempt was made to begin work in Guyra, at that time without success. Later, Uralla was to become a separate circuit, but continued to draw on Armidale's support, especially for local preachers.

The history of Methodism was commonly spelt out in terms of the succession of ministers who came and went over the years. The personalities of certain ministers did affect the development and style of the local church's life. J.E.Carruthers is a case in point. Another was the Rev W.H. Beale, who was minister at the time of the building of Wesley Church. Both men were keen on the 'camp meeting' style of evangelism, and led an annual celebration at the Uralla showground each Good Friday, with the participation of a lay evangelist as a normal part of the proceedings. W.H. Beale was also to figure prominently in Armidale's welcome to General William Booth of the Salvation Army, when he visited in 1891. The General was given the hospitality of the Methodist Parsonage during his stay.

The Jubilee of Methodism in Armidale was celebrated in 1909, and a number of the photographs in this booklet were collected for that occasion. In 1901 the union of Methodist churches in Australia had taken place, and Armidale's Wesleyans became part of the Methodist Church of Australasia. By the Jubilee, further church union was being seriously discussed between the Methodists and Presbyterians. As a sign of this spirit, the Presbyterians of Armidale gave up their own morning service to share with the Methodists at their anniversary service.

In this century, a number of property developments took place. The Kindergarten Hall (now the Parish Offices) was built in 1924. The upper storey of the Parsonage was built in 1928. In 1935 the Willis organ was installed in the church. Imported from London in 1879 for St Stephen's Presbyterian Church in Sydney, the organ was bought for 1000 pounds for Wesley Church when St Stephen's was demolished. In 1983 the organ was restored, after an appeal which involved many members of the congregation and also the Armidale community.

In 1959, during the ministry of the Rev Dr James Udy, the centenary of Armidale Methodism was commemorated with a major stewardship campaign, and a centenary service at which the guest preacher was the President General, the Rev Dr A.H. Wood. Dr Wood also laid the foundation stone of the new Youth Centre, which was opened in 1961. About this time two neighbouring properties were purchased, one of which became the second residence for some years, and the other the Coffee House. The ministry of the Coffee House was an initiative of the Rev Gordon Trickett.

The next most significant event occurred in June, 1977, with the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia. From 1901 various attempts had been made to achieve church union, principally involving the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches. Wesley Uniting Church now stands as a visible witness to the ongoing ministry of the Uniting Church in our community, and as the central meeting place of a parish that embraces Guyra, Uralla, and the rural centres of Arding, Brockley, Hillgrove, Kingstown, Wollomombi and Yarrowyck.

In recent years the Wesley Church building has been improved in a number of important ways. Several new stained-glass windows have been added, as gifts and memorials from families who have been part of the congregation. The other windows have also been renovated by the Property Committee. For the Bicentenary, heritage funds were made available to enable the slates on the roof to be completely renovated. Also for the Bicentenary, a time capsule was placed beneath the building. This was an initiative of Mr Phillip Sharpe. The repainting of the interior of the church is a future project. And now even bigger plans are being considered, to enlarge the building.

At the Jubilee celebrations of 1909 Edmund Lonsdale, M.L.A., recalled how, about 1869, the then minister, William Wilson, planted some trees in the church grounds. Mr Wilson was told, "You will not get much benefit from those trees." He had replied, "No man liveth unto himself ..." The Presbyterian minister, the Rev H.S. Buntine, then spoke, saying that "the Rev J.W. Holden (the incumbent minister) and his officers ... were not only Methodists, but belonged to a wider Church, the great family of God itself. ... and thus, hand in hand, heart answering to heart, we must go forward trying to lead mankind and preaching the gospel ..." It is in a similar spirit that we celebrate today the centenary of the building of Wesley Uniting Church.

Robert Luxton

(Sources: The Armidale Express, The Methodist, Gilbert, Maddox, Pocock, Waters; for details, see further Reading).

FURTHER READING

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A HISTORY OF COUNTRY CHURCHES

The boundaries of the original Armidale Wesleyan Circuit measured approximately 100 kilometres by 110 kilometres in area.

There were vast distances to travel to reach isolated shepherds' camps and pioneering families living on their selected farms. Some scattered families professing the "Wesleyan Faith" could only receive a visit from the resident minister about twice a year. Several townships had progressed with small but growing populations who expected to be "ministered to" more regularly.

At Uralla and Saumarez Ponds, there was quite a gathering of the "faithful" and due to lesser distance to travel they received regular visits from the clergymen.

Church buildings were erected and dedicated in both of these centres in October 1872, while at Rocky River worship was conducted in the Miners Institute.

A brief attempt to establish a "cause" in the Guyra district in 1874 was abandoned until a later date.

Roads were bad and bridges unknown leading to outlying areas of the circuit. If the minister could not officiate then the gathering would be led in worship by one of the "Faithful".

The Arding district was more densely populated than other farming areas and the locals had been meeting regularly at the farmhouse of Mr Wiggins. Mr Parkinson had a portion of his selected farm surveyed for a church site and in July 1883, the Arding Wesleyan Church building was dedicated. Several services were conducted on that day and a large number of families attended from both near and far.

The Maitland Point church building was built at the time of the Wesleyan revival Easter meetings which began in Uralla in 1886.

There was an increasing spiritual awakening throughout the Armidale Circuit during the following years. Lay preachers had increased in number and eight additional preaching places were taken up.

To become a full member of the Methodist Church, firstly one had to be examined to establish one's true faith and knowledge of "The Word", and secondly, class meetings had to be attended at least once a week.

For residents in outlying districts it was most difficult to become a full member under these circumstances and they would have to forever remain "Associates on Trial".

Church buildings in these areas were desperately needed and between lambing and shearing seasons, and other seasonal farm jobs, church buildings were finally completed. Between 1890 and 1892, at Brockley in the east and Kingstown and Bell's Swamp in the far south-western side, buildings were erected, while a home was thrown open in the same area at "Stockgrove" at which lay ministers regularly presided.

Just prior to this date a thriving community developed at the gold-mining town of Hillgrove. In 1889, a church building considered to be the "prettiest church in the circuit" was erected and the Rev W.G. Willard was appointed by Conference to reside at Hillgrove.

Nearby at the new mining town of West Hillgrove (Metz), a church building was opened in 1892, this being the first church of any denomination in the town.

Five new country church buildings were erected over this period of several years and the new Armidale church building was completed and dedicated.

With the financial situation of the leading banks in Australia in such a depressed state then, the construction of these buildings was a fine example of the Wesleyan followers' determination to have a worthy place of worship at such a great sacrifice.

During the following decades, more church buildings were completed and other preaching places opened in private homes.

Yarrowyck, Watson's Creek, Kentucky South, Guyra, Llangothlin and other small communities erected places for worship or combined with various denominations in "Union" Churches.

One lady reported that the last threepence she had left in the world had gone onto the collection plate and another expressed regret at not having even a shilling to give to the West Hillgrove building cause.

These country church buildings were completed and maintained with quite a financial sacrifice to the local church community.

Some have stood for over 100 years and others are but a reminder to the traveller of the dedicated supporters of the "Wesleyan Faith" who erected a place of worship to the "Glory of God".

Arnold Goode