



- Discussion Paper: Transforming History –

This Discussion Paper by Kerrie Handasyde (Adjunct Lecturer in Churches of Christ History at Stirling Theological College, University of Divinity) is adapted from her article, ‘Transforming History: The Origins of the Stone-Campbell Movement in Victoria, Australia’, published in *Stone-Campbell Journal* Vol. 17/1 (Spring 2014).

To view the article please subscribe to the journal or join the Stone-Campbell Scholars Community. <http://www.stone-campbelljournal.com/community/join-now/>

Discussion Paper: Transforming History Kerrie Handasyde

What could a nineteenth-century evangelist in a top hat and bow-tie have to say to us? Can tent-dwellers speak across 160 years? This discussion paper looks at two different stories about the origins of Churches of Christ in Victoria. More than a century’s distance between us and the people from our past allows us to examine their approach *without sharing all their assumptions*. By contrast, when we read about contemporary evangelists we have difficulty critiquing because we think like they do. We are immersed in the same world. We come to the discussion with the same cultural assumptions *and blind-spots*. Frequently we find ourselves motivated by what they say - and affirmed in what we already believe. The past does not let us get away with such easy thinking. The past shows us mission and ministry in a strange light. The thoughts and actions of our past evangelists are confronting. We cannot read about them and just think, ‘yes, let’s do that’. More than this, their stories cast light on our present actions. History can transform how we see and act.

Every congregation has its story of how it came into being: the obstacles faced, the chapel built, the membership beginning to grow. These popular histories describe the character and purpose of a people. Churches of Christ in Victoria, Australia, trace their origins to the congregation at Prahran in 1853 - a congregation with an especially memorable beginning. Its genesis story persists. But as a story of the origins of the Conference of Churches of Christ in Victoria, it is limited, local, and no longer effective. The story has little connection to the present or insight into the central ecclesiological tensions that developed in Churches of Christ in Victoria 150 years ago. So how might our church—local and denominational—articulate its history anew among its own people so that the past may speak meaningfully into the present? How have we told our history in the past? How might we tell it in the future?

In the beginning there was a tent

The first story of origins focused on Henry Picton’s tent in Prahran where six hardy British souls met and shared the Lord’s Supper under canvas in January 1853. Sometimes the story is told differently.

Sometimes it is James Ingram's tent where the first Lord's Supper was held (despite the evidence of shipping records and contemporary newspaper reports). These two contesting versions demonstrate that the question of who comes first echoes on beyond the sons of Zebedee. Either way, the group met in the tent only briefly before moving on through an inauspicious series of rental properties. But the tent endures as a symbol of hardship and adversity to be overcome. It signifies humility before God, and the pragmatism of Australians making do. It also ties in with the significant gold rush moment in Victoria's history. Taking a wider cultural perspective, the image of the tent resonates with the much larger Australian narrative of human vulnerability in an unforgiving landscape. It is understandable that such an image has stuck in the minds of Churches of Christ, enduring beyond the primitivist horizon of the church it depicts. However, ultimately it is a myth of origin for a small church in need of protection from a hostile world. That is not who we are. Today the calling of Churches of Christ in Australia is more often expressed as mission, leadership, and ministry to a broken world, communities of hope and compassion. For a narrative of origin to bring people together and inform the church's reason for being, it must reframe the story in the light of these contemporary concerns.

In the beginning the evangelists made the difference

Here is another story of our church's beginning – a story of preachers and teachers. At the Church of Christ in Prahran, numbers fluctuated considerably as people passed through on the way to the goldfields. However, for the first several years, Henry Picton was a constant, and the eldership initially rested on him and Samuel Kidner, who “were recognised as the most suitable men to fill this important position”.¹ These men, a legal clerk and a homeopathic pharmacist respectively, also had the task of preaching the gospel to the congregation in the evenings (with some help from neighboring elders). In an effort to gain converts, they took their often poorly developed preaching skills to the streets, though it was “slow, trying work”.² Picton later hired a “small room in Chapel-street” for the purpose, but found progress frustrating. Indeed it is reported that on one occasion his only audience was a trio of “stately goats”³ whose entrance might have added an element of theatre, albeit absurdist, missing from the oratory. Like other British lay preachers in the fledgling movement, Picton's style was almost certainly dry and reasoning - though he reported the goat story himself so we can also guess that was acquainted with humility.

Picton and the men of this first generation believed in solely lay ministry. They also knew they needed help with preaching. In fact, in 1853 they requested that preachers be sent from Britain to help them. But none were sent. From the beginning, lay resistance to trained leadership was fuelled not only by a rich seam of anti-clericalism, but by unfulfilled need. We demonise what we desire but cannot have.

Over ten years later, British-born, American-trained preacher Henry Samuel Earl strode into Melbourne with his top hat and bow tie. He was, in his own words, “the first and only evangelist whose time has been wholly devoted to the work in this country; so that we need not wonder that the cause has not made much progress.”⁴ This was not true (and I suspect he knew it), but it does capture the self-assurance of the man and his canny use of publicity. Earl found the Church of Christ in Melbourne meeting in a “small, unsightly and unpopular room in Russell Street.”⁵ It did not fit the scope of his vision:

I at once told them that it would be a waste of time and labor for me to preach in that place. . . .
I decided that St George's Hall, Bourke Street, was the most suitable as it was well located, of

good repute and the largest in the city. This hall was secured and I preached my first sermon in it to an audience of not less than 800 on Lord's day, July 31st, 1864. The next Lord's day it was well filled and the following Lord's day it was crowded to overflowing with an audience of about 1800 persons. All available standing room, as well as every seat, was occupied. This interest and attendance continued unabated to my last sermon on October 8, 1865.⁶

No goats or tents were in Earl's narrative. Humility was out. Modest, self-deprecating stories of faithful perseverance would not bring about the kingdom of God as he saw it. Reports in *The Argus* strongly suggest his skill and effectiveness in preaching were not exaggerated:

St George's Hall was crowded last evening on the occasion of a sermon being preached there by Mr H.S. Earl, B.A., a gentleman announced by advertisement as from America. His subject was "The Messiah" and the discourse was remarkable, inasmuch as the preacher addressed himself to his audience in a style totally different from the received modes of pulpit oratory, his manner and actions being those of a speaker on secular subjects, rather than those usually adopted when religion is the theme.⁷

After a year at the Church of Christ in Melbourne, Earl had added 200 more to their number, a significant increase on the colony-wide membership of 400. All the churches, including Prahran which he visited in September 1865, benefited from the energy, clarity, and vigour of his preaching. Other Americans followed. Their sermons had tension and drama. Churches held Sunday night gospel services where preachers roused with hortatory oration and singing crescendoed as altar calls were made. The people responded and went forth to be baptized by immersion—a spectacle often undertaken at public beaches, in rivers, and in purpose-built tanks, the preachers wearing white gowns and special "baptismal trousers" purchased by mail-order.⁸

But Earl did not only preach. He taught others to do so, encouraging and publicly praising their efforts. Some young Australian men like JW Webb first realized their vocation at Adelpian classes like those led by Earl in 1864 at the fledgling Church of Christ in Doncaster.⁹ The Americans actively mentored Australian men for lay leadership and evangelism. Not only their preaching but their teaching changed Australian Churches of Christ.

A significant number of Australian men were so immensely influenced by American-style preaching and Earl's Adelpian classes that they travelled to Lexington, Kentucky, to enrol at the College of the Bible. Crossing the globe the study was an enormous undertaking, and many chose to stay in the U.S.¹⁰ This loss of talent prompted calls for a ministry training college in Australia. Until this point in time, the church in Australia had been modeled on the exclusively lay British pattern, albeit with American voices. Now a divergence was made. We started to dream of an Australian college, modeled on the American, to satisfy the Australian demand for preachers in the American style. The project to establish a college had a few false starts and a number of ventures were tried. Finally, in 1906, the Federal Conference of Churches of Christ resolved to establish a national ministry training college in Victoria.¹¹ Named after the college in Lexington, the (Australian) College of the Bible was led by *Australian* preachers Harry G. Harward (Principal) and James Johnston. They had both trained in the U.S. While elders still governed churches, they shared their influence with Australia's young educated evangelists, who modeled themselves on those from America and traced their educational lineage to Kentucky. Significantly the college has since been re-named after an Australian preacher - Stirling.

So why is this story of our origins not widely known? There are a few reasons, but the biggest is that our history-telling is influenced by our church structure. Congregations are governed by local church councils, and local people have written local histories. We have told the story of our movement in bits and pieces: a tent here, a church hall there. Aside from a few early-20th century histories focused on denomination building (replete with membership statistics and photos of institutions - a very twentieth century fascination) we have largely written small stories. These stories are valuable to congregations: they honour and remember and bind the members together. But knowing our own small piece of history is not enough to give us a sense of who we are as a people, and why we are as we are. It is a cliché, but the whole is so much greater than the sum of the parts.

The end: beginning again

Just as the gospel must be interpreted for the living, the past must be told anew if it is to speak meaningfully into the present. The audacious and visionary work of the evangelists, from America, Britain, and most importantly, among the Victorian people transformed what were essentially sectarian beginnings into a dynamic movement. As long as calling every member to mission and ministry through inspirational leadership matters, the story of the evangelists who changed the landscape through their preaching and their teaching must be incorporated into the narrative of origin of Churches of Christ in Victoria. Our collective history matters. It is time to tell the story again from the beginning.

¹ Chapman, *No Other Foundation*, 160.

² Maston, *Jubilee Pictorial History*, 247.

³ Maston, *Jubilee Pictorial History*, 247.

⁴ Letter to the *American Christian Review*, quoted in the *British Millennial Harbinger* (1865) 141.

⁵ Letter cited in *Digest of the Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society*, No 93 (April 1987).

⁶ Letter cited in *Digest of the Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society*, No 93 (April 1987).

⁷ *The Argus*, August 8, 1864.

⁸ The Austral Printing and Publishing Company, led by A. B. Maston, ran a small trade in baptismal trousers made by the Goodyear rubber company, advertising in their national journal, *Australian Christian* (March 27, 1902) 156.

⁹ J. Ernest Allan, "Souvenir History of the Church of Christ, Doncaster, Victoria: 1863–1913," 8.

¹⁰ Chapman, *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*, 86.

¹¹ Chapman, *One Lord*, 86.