

Baptists in the Tropics

By Rev Dr David Parker © July 2023

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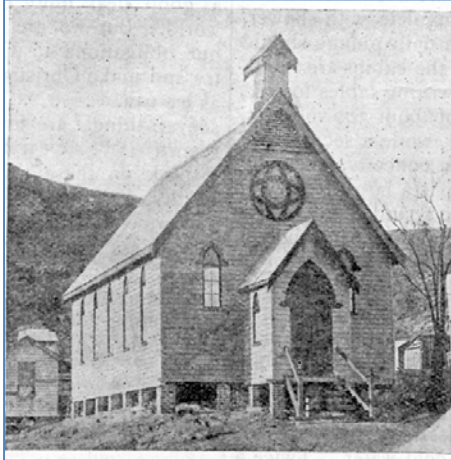
‘In Queensland, the semitropical climate does not attract European settlers; hence only a score of churches have stability.’ So said the respected American Baptist historian, Robert G Torbet in his definitive book, *A History of the Baptists*.

There are now about 20 Baptist churches officially listed as being located in the tropics** but when Torbet wrote there were only three – Townsville, Charters Towers and Cairns. At the end of World War II, there were 64 members in those churches, about 1.2% of the total number in the state. Today the reported membership is closer to 900, 5% of the total. It was not only the climate that held Baptist progress back – smaller populations, poor infrastructure and huge distances were also key factors. But even so, the area was often mentioned as a place where there should have been more progress, and at various times there were plenty of Baptists travelling or living in the region.

Townsville

The first place where a Baptist church was established was Townsville, and that was in 1888, more than 30 years after the Baptist work began in the colony. By then, Townsville, situated 1150 km north of Brisbane, was well on the way to becoming the leading city of North Queensland. Following exploration in the area in the 1840’s and 1860’s, and fed by gold discoveries in the hinterland, the town was established in 1864 on the banks of the Ross Creek and soon became an important coastal port for the whole of northern and north-western Queensland. A rail line was constructed westward in 1882 and the port facilities on Cleveland Bay were improved to cope with the demand of the pastoral, agricultural and mining industries of the area. The city, described in 1903 as ‘picturesque if not elegant’, became an industrial rather than a tourist centre, with a reputation for radicalism. A rail link to Brisbane was completed in 1923. During World War II it became a major base for military operations, and continues today in that same role.

The Anglican Church was established in 1871 and the Roman Catholic a year later, followed by Congregationalists in 1875, Methodists in 1876, and Presbyterians in 1884. The Anglican Diocese of North Queensland was set up in 1883, with the Diocese of Carpentaria being formed in 1900 from part of the northern area of the NQ Diocese.



According to the 1907 Jubilee history, a Baptist church of 11 members was formed early in 1888, meeting in a rented building and conducting services using local leaders. Assistance by the Baptist Association later in the year led to the arrival of Rev J H Price for a six-month period. Other short-term ministries followed until Rev F G Buckingham settled in 1891 which led to good progress, including the purchase of land and the acquisition of a disused Congregational church which was moved to the Sturt Street site, opening in 1893.

Other ministries followed until 1903 when 'Cyclone Leonta' hit the town inflicting much damage including the destruction of the Baptist church building. Re-construction

started soon after in a modest way in the hope that a more substantial structure would be erected in due course, but sadly, the church as a fellowship had also been badly damaged. As the Jubilee history stated, divisions within the church fellowship which soon occurred 'caused more trouble than the cyclone' and so services ceased. After some time, more help was offered by the Baptist Association with the arrival of Rev George Burns which led to hopes of a good recovery.

An outstation operated for a few years around World War I at Hermit Park, south-west of the CBD, and in the 1922, the main church building was replaced with a stone structure. Other churches were planted at a much later time at Aitkenvale and Currajong. But these combined and moved to a large new site at Kirwan, about 12 kms from the original location which opened in 1982. Membership hovered around 50 or fewer until the 1980s, but reached a peak of over 300 in the early 2000s. Other new plants have taken place in recent years. Now known as Northreach Baptist Church, the current reported membership is around 150.

Charters Towers

The second Baptist church in North Queensland was in Charters Towers, commencing only a few months after Townsville. Located 100 km south-west of Townsville and a few kilometres from the Burdekin River, this town sprang to fame because of gold mining, and soon became outstandingly rich.

The earliest European contact with the area was in 1845 when Leichhardt traversed it. In 1859 tenders were called for pastoral runs. But then from the mid-1860s, gold was discovered in various parts of the surrounding area including Ravenswood about 70 kms east. The discovery of rich deposits in the Charter Towers area itself took place in 1872. Exploitation began immediately, with huge amounts being mined.

By the 1890s, Charters Towers was Queensland's second largest town and was known locally and beyond as 'The World' – there was a stock exchange, banks, hotels, commercial operations, schools and many other businesses, often housed in magnificent buildings. The city was incorporated in 1877. Several trains a day connected it with Townsville. The myriad of heritage-listed buildings still remaining today is testament to the town's spectacular history.



During this development there were several Baptists in the town and Rev William Whale (Wharf Street) visited them in late 1888, forming them into a church. The Baptist Association assisted with the support of Rev John Brame to continue the work, but his health soon failed, and he had to leave prematurely. However, land had been secured and steps were being taken to obtain a building, a former Methodist Church. The church was ably led by Rev John Vigis for a decade during which it

was well established. In an epic chapter of the church's short history, its building was physically relocated to a more central site in Ryan Street in 1901, being dragged by a steam tractor in the process. The ministry of Rev C H J Warren saw the membership increase and the Sunday School became one of the largest in the state.

The mining boom continued for a couple of decades with the population reaching over 15,000 in 1911. However, productivity then declined, and by World War I, gold mining had become uneconomical, leaving the area to depend on pastoral and agricultural pursuits; education also became a major feature of the town's economy, with several boarding schools catering for regional and rural families. It was a major centre of military activity during World War II. There has been some revival of mining pursuits in the wider area in more recent years.

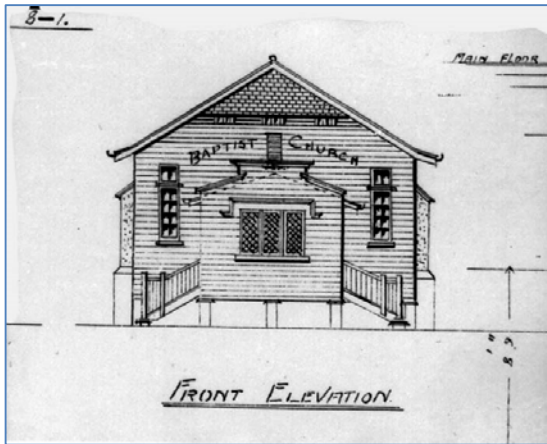
The strength of the Baptist Church followed the fortunes of the town with its greatest reported membership exceeding 100 around 1904. However, it slipped during the 1920s and 1930s to a very low figure. There was some recovery in the 1960s and onwards. The old building was replaced with a modern structure in 1971, and then in 1999, a short-lived experimental merger took place with the local Church of Christ, using a heritage-listed former Lutheran Church building. The church now meets in another building, its fourth location.

Cairns

It took more than 40 years before there was any more expansion of Baptists in the North Queensland tropics. During this period, Cairns and the Tablelands to the west had developed strongly and the region was well on the way to becoming the gateway to the north of the state and to the Great Barrier Reef – a role that would only continue to expand in the years to come.

The area had been explored in the 1870s. Then gold was discovered in the hinterland in 1876 and Cairns became the natural port of entry. Later tin was found, and the Tableland became a rich farming and timber area. Sugar was introduced in the late 1890s and soon became one of the strongest industries. But the area was not without its hazards, with cyclones striking on at least seven occasions from the late 1870s through to the 1920s. Methodist and Presbyterian churches were well established by the mid-1880s, alongside the Roman Catholic and Anglican denominations.

During that time, many Baptists had moved to the area for business and others visited for holidays. Visionary Baptist leaders, especially the Home Mission Superintendent, Rev Ben Hewison, were well aware of this development and of the need to establish Baptist work. There were often reports in the *Queensland Baptist* and at the Assembly about the opportunities.



When Mr Hewison visited Cairns in 1928, he spoke at the Presbyterian Church and was surprised to find that many of the key workers were Baptists. The minister at Charters Towers was aware of Baptist people moving to Cairns and did his best to maintain contact with them.

By 1930, Cairns had a population of 12,000, and there was a strong feeling that it was time for Baptist work to begin. One of key founders was Mr M J Tappenden from Maryborough, a young business man who years later wrote a history of the church. had He moved into the area to join others from the south. A church planter was available – Rev

G N Gibson, who had recently retired from a long period of work with the Baptist Missionary Society (UK) in India.

So a start was made with the first services being held in the Oddfellows Hall in May 1933. Mr Gibson worked effectively to establish the church for several months and then indicated that he wished to hand over the growing work to a person with more local knowledge. The choice fell on Rev Ernest Edwards, then at Enoggera in Brisbane. He took up the work in January 1934, remaining in the post for six years before moving on to a lengthy and outstanding period of ministry in many other roles.

Land was secured in Lake Street and a church building was erected in 1936. It was designed for the location by Architect George Trotter, whose standard church building plan was utilised by the Baptist Union until a new modern style by Ray W Smith was adopted just over 20 years later.

Membership gradually grew over the years to around the 50s in the 1970s, and then to well over 100, but it has fallen back now below that figure. For some time during the post-war period, some outstations flourished in growing areas of the town back from the coast.

Other developments

Concerns had been expressed almost from the beginning of Baptist work in Queensland to seize 'Queensland for Christ' (as a promotional banner put it), and that goal certainly included remote places in the north and north-west of the state. But after a whole century there were still only these three. There had been a welcome, if very short-lived, work amongst the indigenous people on Palm Island off Townsville in the late 1920s when about 75 people were converted and baptised, forming what was regarded then as probably the only such Baptist church in the country. However, for the most part, Baptists left the work amongst the indigenous people to various interdenominational missions, which were generally very well supported by Baptists.

Despite the very slow start of Baptists claiming 'Queensland for Christ', there would soon be a change. In the 1960s a concerted effort was made by the Baptist Union through the Home Mission to plant several new churches along the northern coast and inland. There was further development from the 1980s with the advent of Mission to Queensland. So perhaps Queenslanders have at last shown the even a notable historian like R G Torbet needs to be corrected when it comes to ministry in the tropics.

*** For the story of Baptists in Central Queensland up to the Tropic of Capricorn, see our book, Something More than Gold- more details at <https://www.bhsq.org/bhq/pubs/index.html>*