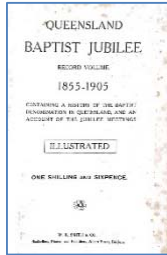


The famous Brisbane north/south rivalry and Baptist churches

By Rev Dr David Parker © September 2023

Territorial Brisbane



Brisbane is famously territorial, as seen in the long-standing rivalries over the virtues of living on the north versus the south of the river. Although perhaps not so obvious recently, and probably explained in part by the poor river crossings and difficult transportation generally, this was a strong factor in the social life of the city over many years. This rivalry might even show up in the first official history of Baptists in Queensland covering 1855-1905 which described only one church on the south side (although with outstations) compared with 13 on the north (including Toowong and Taringa in Western Suburbs). But it is a much more complex story than that!

Rev B G Wilson's outreaches

The north-south bias evidently did not stop Rev B G Wilson, the energetic evangelist and pastor of the first church, Wharf Street (1859-1878), from setting up preaching stations in some locations south of the river, as well as many on the north side and elsewhere. They were typically based on the homes of attendees of his church. There are references to these as late as the 1870s as far away as Pimpama and at Eight Mile Plains.

One of these was near the mouth of Oxley Creek (present-day Graceville, near the Pamphlett Bridge) where a chapel was opened on 22 May 1864 and used for services and community events for many years. There may have been another further north in the large area known as 'Boggo' stretching from Dutton Park south to Rocklea between the river and Annerley and Ipswich Roads. But the records are vague. However, these preaching places declined for various reasons. One important factor was the severe tension that arose in the Wharf Street church around 1864 over Wilson's ministry and leadership.

Fairfield

Some of those who were opposed to him established a fellowship at Fairfield. The brothers, Samuel and George Grimes, who had valuable property and business interests in the area, were amongst these. Known as Fairfield Baptist Church, this church was set up in 1865 and erected a modest building near the original location of the Fairfield Railway Station (near the current Fairfield Gardens Shopping Centre). The fellowship flourished in later years, requiring a larger building which was erected in 1889.



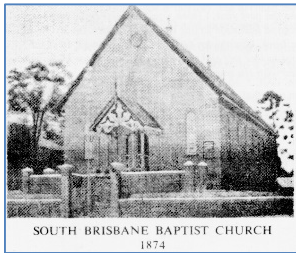
For some reason, which cannot be determined due to the lack of adequate records, after its establishment as a seemingly self-supporting church, Fairfield became an outstation of the South Brisbane church (at the latest by 1881 and probably earlier). It remained in this relationship until its official constitution as an independent church in 1912. In 1934 it relocated to 556 Annerley Road (and was renamed Annerley Baptist Church) and still continues its ministry today.

In 1940, due to population growth, Annerley established another church in Fairfield, not far from the original, at 75 Fairfield Road. It relocated to the corner of Cross and Sunbeam Streets in 1986, and is now known as Fairfield Christian Family. Then in 1953 Annerley planted another work in Tarragindi, but this cause closed in 1988. Another work was started at Salisbury in 1956, which continues to

operate. In the 1960s, it worked with the Home Mission to establish a new church which opened at Acacia Ridge on 17 September 1966.

South Brisbane – Vulture Street

The South Brisbane church, often known as Vulture Street Baptist Church, had its origins in a Sunday School dating from the early days. The Wharf Street church also held services in South Brisbane in the Presbyterian church for some time while that building was available. However, when a church was formed on 17 Nov 1872, meeting in the old Mechanics Institute in Stanley Street, it was not aligned with Wharf Street, but with those who had earlier opposed Wilson. Some of the leading members were Samuel Grimes, Thomas Blackett Stephens, Ebenezer Hooker and R A Kingsford. Land was obtained at a strategic site in Vulture Street, at the corner of Christie Street, where a wooden building 50' x 30' in size, costing 492 pounds was opened in May 1874.



There was no pastor until 1877 when Rev T L Davies took over the leadership for a brief period. He was followed by the outstanding pastor, Rev William Poole, who served from 1880 to 1910, and was also responsible for numerous important initiatives through the Baptist Union including the Foreign Mission, the Home Mission and the *Queensland Baptist* magazine. The church saw substantial growth and building improvements, and it sponsored many further church planting initiatives in later years.

Other well-known capable pastors led the church in later years, including Rev William Bell and Rev T C Warriner (second and third principals of the Baptist Theological College), Rev J E White, Rev Reg Jarrott, and Rev N W Mergard. While the church occupied a key location, much attention was required to maintain the buildings and to exploit the site creatively. Eventually, in 2013 the church relocated to commercial premises at 859 Stanley Street, close to the famous Gabba cricket ground, which prompted a name change to Church@thegabba.

In 1951, South Brisbane church commenced an open-air Sunday School at 13 Koolatah Street, Carina. Rapid growth saw a small building placed on the block and then a church, known as Belmont Baptist Church, opened on 19 May 1951. The building is currently used by a Jewish group.

Bulimba

Meanwhile, Wilson's efforts at church planting on the south side bore some fruit, however transient. One of his early converts (from Presbyterianism), James Johnson, had considerable property in the farming district of Bulimba, an area that was quickly becoming known as a residential area, enhanced by a permanent ferry service from Newstead in the 1860s. Using his home for services at first, in 1862 he gave land and erected a building for a church in Henderson Street. Wharf Street assisted with the costs and also provided leadership and preachers. However, as Johnson was among the antagonists of Wilson, the Bulimba church lost its links with Wharf Street for many years, with the result that various other churches and the Baptist Union took responsibility for it over many years. It never grew strongly, although a new larger chapel was required in 1886. It was not constituted until 1940, and then in 1960, it was relocated to a new site at 25 Lytton Road, Balmoral.

In 1968 it merged with nearby Norman Park church. This fellowship had been initiated in 1931 by Jireh church as a Sunday School and was constituted as a church in 1943. It made use of the old Fairfield Baptist school hall relocated to its site at 75 Dickson Street. The merger of Bulimba and Norman Park was known as Carey Baptist Church. This church closed in 2012 and the property was used as a satellite location for New Heart Baptist Church (formerly, Rochedale). Meanwhile, Norman Park had been responsible for a Sunday School which eventually became Cannon Hill Baptist Church whose building

at 170 Richmond Road was opened on 12 April 1964. After many changes, in 2013, this church became a campus of Birkdale Baptist.

Thompson Estate, Belmont and Carina

Meanwhile, South Brisbane Baptist Church was later responsible for several more outstations.

The first of these was a new work about 2 km south, to the east of the current Princess Alexandra Hospital. It took its name, Thompson Estate Baptist Church, from the new, rapidly growing popular housing development between Ipswich and Logan Roads. A quarter-acre block was purchased in 1884 at 34 O'Keefe Street and a small church was erected on it in 1885, being opened on 19 July 1885. (No photograph is known to exist apart from a small aerial view in 1936.) It was renovated at various times and enlarged in 1934 to seat 200.

In the early days, one of the key long-time leaders was Richard A Kingsford, a member of South Brisbane and son of the veteran pastor of Jireh Baptist Church in Fortitude Valley, Rev John Kingsford. Over the years the church served the area faithfully under the leadership of several well-known pastors including Rev W L Jarvis (later the famous evangelist), Rev G McKechnie, Rev E V Keith, Rev P J Evans and Rev V C Bowring. Deaconess Bel McMahon was one of the last pastoral leaders. Rev Syd Beames and Rev R W Brown both entered the ministry from this church. The church building was used by many local community organisations. As well as all the normal services, Sunday School and ladies' work, the church was prominent with its sporting teams and temperance lodges. It was a strong supporter of Baptist missions. For a short time in the late 1880s, services were also held on the Ferndale Estate, an area beyond the current Annerley Baptist church.

Organisationally, Thompson Estate church was at different times a branch of South Brisbane, under the Queensland Baptist Home Mission, or independent, often in relationship with other nearby church plants of the mother church. At one time it was reputed to have the largest Sunday School in the state, due in large part to the energetic work of its superintendent, David Webster, the well-known biscuit manufacturer. Membership of the church ranged up to about 50 until 1940 and then declined to around 40 for the next decade. Eventually changes to the area and internal issues led to decline even further, and the church was closed in 1959.

The building was demolished by the Queensland Baptist Men's Societies (taking 288 man-hours). The materials were used in the erection of a new church at 2 Gray Street (corner Creek Road) Carindale, under the sponsorship of the Belmont church, which was opened on 7 April 1962. Regarded as a continuation of the Thompson Estate, it was constituted on 7 March 1965, as the 100th church in the membership of the Baptist Union. Belmont church eventually became unviable in its original location and so it merged with Carina in January 1971. The new combined church closed in 1988.

Greenslopes and Majestic Park



Another church to be established in Brisbane south before World War was Greenslopes, originally known as Dunellan, in line with the estate names.

The starting point was a Sunday School conducted by John Olsen (sight impaired) in 1897 in a vacant butcher's shop on the corner of Logan Road and Douglas Street. Open-air meetings were held across the road near Dunellan Street. Mr William Laing was also a key pioneer.

Soon the gatherings were relocated to the Olsen home on the corner of Thomas and Dunellan Streets. In 1899, a block in Cedar Street was purchased and a 20' X 15' building erected in which the services were held. The work prospered with some building alterations to cope with the demand. In 1913 the

structure was relocated to the current site on the corner of Dunellan Street and Henry Street with the entry from the latter. Sometime later, another block was purchased, and the building moved yet again elsewhere on the property. Years later it was shifted to Sandgate.

The church received a considerable boost in 1917 when Mr David Webster, the prominent member of Vulture Street church, came to assist it as Sunday School Superintendent. He was a generous benefactor to this and other Baptist causes. Greenslopes, along with Thompson Estate and Coorparoo became a Home Mission circuit around 1917. It was said that ‘an aggressive evangelist’ was needed as pastor, so Rev Wilfred L Jarvis was appointed. He went on to become one of Australia’s most well-known and fruitful Baptist evangelists and pastors. Sister Grace, a deaconess, also made a large contribution through her work of visitation and practical assistance in the homes of the district. It was said that she ‘practically worked the church’ as far as pastoral care was concerned.

In 1920, Rev (later Dr) E L Watson, a well-known evangelist from NSW, conducted a mission which yielded several new converts. This meant that the church could be constituted, an event which took place on 4 Nov 1920. Further growth followed under the auspices of the Home Mission until it became autonomous in 1929 under the name Greenslopes Baptist Church, to reflect changes in the local area. The current heritage-listed church building in Spanish Mission style, was opened on 14 October 1933.

Meanwhile, further rapid suburban expansion southward called for another Baptist church to be established. This took place under the ministry of Rev E V Keith at 11 Yuletide Street, Holland Park, using materials from a disused Anglican building. That church later relocated to Mackenzie as Gateway Baptist Church, and the original premises are now occupied by Grace Bible Church.

In the 1950s Greenslopes church also planted a new work at Majestic Park, which after relocations and a merger is known as Eastside Community Church. Vulture Street church had previously attempted a church plant in this area, but it had not succeeded.

Coorparoo

The Coorparoo church also had its initial beginnings before World War I. The first efforts were undertaken by Mr W H Harris, who had been active at Greenslopes, under the auspices of the Queensland Preachers’ Society, a unit of the Home Mission. He did extensive visitation, inaugurated a Sunday School and conducted Sunday services from 1910. The services were conducted on the veranda of a shop on the corner of Temple Street and Bennetts Road. Soon there was enough support to purchase land at 93 Temple Street (corner Armuna St) and the 30’ X 28’ building was erected and opened on 17 July 1910 at the cost of 150 pounds. The ‘Coorparoo Mission’ church was established at the same time.



During the following years, this church continued to serve the needs of the district and in 1924 it was formally constituted with 27 members. In 1927 the building was extended, and in 1953 it was raised to provide more space. The church remained dependent on the Home Mission until 1962. The building was replaced in 1969, but in 2001 it ceased operations due to declining numbers. The property was made available to a Korean Baptist fellowship which had been meeting at the City Tabernacle, and it took the old name of Coorparoo Baptist Church.

Other churches in the Brisbane South area

Further away from these churches and going full circle, another centre of Baptist attention was at Graceville, developing from the early 1920s. The pioneers of this work were well aware of Wilson’s

work in the general area some 60 years earlier, at Oxley Creek, and regretted the long absence of Baptist witness.

There were various evangelistic missions and other efforts sponsored by the Baptist Union and well supported by different churches. Interest grew, and under the leadership of Rev J H Latimer at the nearby Taringa church (on the north side of the river), a concerted effort resulted in the purchase of 3 blocks of land in Raakeevan Street, Graceville, a short distance from the railway station, and the opening of a 100-seat church, 31' x 21' in size on 22 January 1927. An independent church of 16 members was formed which had a promising life until the mid-1960s. The original building was sold to become the Woodridge Baptist Church located at the corner of Ewing and Defiance Roads (opened December 1965) and a new church was erected in a more central location at 409 Sherwood Road on 2 April 1966. The church was renamed accordingly, and served the area until 1996 when declining support led to its closure.

In late 1938 South Brisbane church became host to a Russian Baptist fellowship by arranging for their services to be held in the church until they erected their own building at 21 Crown Street Woolloongabba, which was opened on 14 Dec 1941. A previous pastor of South Brisbane, Rev A T Whale, had been Secretary of the Russian Missionary Society. (It is notable that there was an effective ministry among Russian people in the Callide Valley during the 1930s.) In 2008 the Russian church, also known as the Slavic Baptist Church, relocated to a former Brethren church at 217 Cavendish Road, Coorparoo. In 2017 the building became the home of the newly formed City South Baptist Church, and the Slavic church moved to new premises at Meadowbrook.

Two more churches were established in the South Brisbane area, both related to the post-war migrant boom. The first was the Ukrainian Baptist Church which became a member of the Baptist Union in 1954. In 1957 it purchased a property in Inkerman Street, Woolloongabba, about where Stanley Street now passes under the Freeway. But due to the construction of the Freeway, the property was resumed, and the church was relocated to a new site at 6 Agnes Street, Woolloongabba, the 53' x 26' building being opened on 31 Dec 1969. However, the church closed in 1995 and the property is now used by an Islamic group.

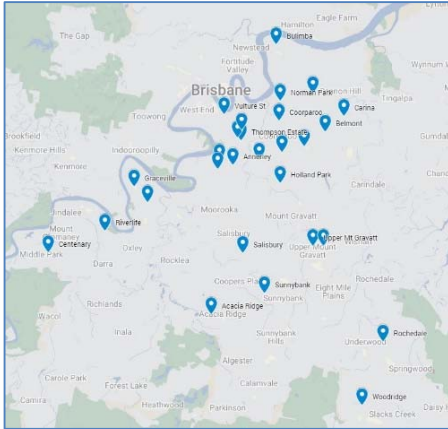


The other church was Spanish. Following up on services held at the Fairfield church, and church was constituted on 29 April 1971. It bought a former Congregational church at 49 Broadway Street, Woolloongabba in 1972. It became Pentecostal and moved out of the denomination in 1989. The building has been used for secular purposes.

Further afield, there were additional church planting initiatives. In the 1950s, Greenslopes church began reaching out to the Upper Mount Gravatt area and soon they were bussing children to Sunday School. However, the Holland Park church took over this interest. On 29 March 1958 a church building was opened on the corner of Logan Road and Lumley Street. It later re-located to a former Methodist church on the corner of Hertford Street and Dupre Streets, renaming itself Hertford Street Baptist Church.

About the same time the Holland Park church took an interest in a second initiative, this time at Rochedale, but after making some progress, Upper Mt Gravatt church took over. In 1973 a house was purchased on the corner of Rochedale Road and Rangeview Street as a basis for a new church. This work grew substantially and after more relocations, eventually became known as New Heart Baptist Church on the corner of Rochedale Road and Farley Road.

Upper Mount Gravatt also took interest in the Woodridge area which led to the opening of a church on the corner of Ewing and Defiance Roads on 11 Dec 1965 and the constitution of the church on 2 Feb 1971. There were some people from the Beenleigh area, leading to the constitution of the church there in 1974. The Woodridge church later moved to Kingston and changed its name to Kingsridge Baptist Church.



In the early 1950s, the Queensland Baptist Home Mission saw the need for a church in the Sunnybank area and opened a work there in 1957, with some assistance from Salisbury. Twenty years later, the Home Mission also initiated work in the Centenary suburbs and a new church was opened in 1983, named Centenary Jireh, to acknowledge financial assistance given from the sale of the original Jireh church. Then finally in 2017 the Kenmore church on the northside, originally an outreach from Moore Park Baptist Church in 1966, relocated to a spacious new campus at Seventeen Mile Rocks under the new name, Riverlife Baptist Church.

Conclusion

So north-south rivalries aside, there is a far bigger story to be told than just one church in Brisbane South – it is closer to 30! In fact, it is a complex picture involving many openings, closings and removals, reflecting Baptist initiative as the vast areas south of the Brisbane River expanded with new housing, commercial and industrial growth. Then beyond that again is the extensive area of Logan City, with many churches, especially those of other cultures. And this account does not include far-off Redland Bay (1906) or Wynnum (1914) – but that is another story!

Acknowledgements

This article was compiled using the sources of the Baptist Church Archives Qld, including many local church histories), Baptist Historical Society of Queensland, newspapers (consulted via Trove), and the work of authors such as Rev Dr S W Nickerson, Dr L J Ball, Mr R W Hughes and others individually consulted. The photographs are from the Archives collection. The location map is courtesy of Google My Maps.