

Wesleyan Methodist Church in Australia

James M. Ridgway

Introduction

Evangelicalism in Australia has developed along definitely non-denominational lines. Due to the liberalism of the "established" denominations, evangelicals have tended to regard denominationalism and theological liberalism as synonymous. This has resulted in a growth of independent or so-called "inter-denominational" fellowship and missionary movements among evangelicals. These movements, however, have not directed their work of evangelizing through the local church; but have stressed foreign missions to the virtual exclusion of home missions. A further significant characteristic of evangelicalism in Australia has been its emphatic Calvinism. Now it was in this clime of Calvinistic and non-denominational evangelicalism on the one hand, and liberal denominationalism on the other hand, that the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America in Australia came into being.

Beginning Amongst Misunderstanding and Ostracism (1945-1948)

After World War II (1945)

To Chaplain K. M. Ridgway, of the Royal Australian Air Force, the war brought two outstanding realizations. The first was an acute awareness of the spiritual poverty and ignorance of the mass of Australians. The second was a contact with the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America and the conviction that here was the opportunity to do something about the spiritual dearth of his homeland.

Through the testimony of an American soldier in which he gave definite and clear testimony to conversion and entire sanctification, Chaplain Ridgway first learned of Wesleyan Methodism. Attracted by the testimony, he determined to learn more about the soldier's church, and so wrote for in-

formation. After a careful study of the Discipline he said to his wife: "This is exactly what we believe, and the requirements of its discipline are based on the Scriptures throughout." Correspondence with the leaders of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in America ensued and resulted in a proposition by Chaplain Ridgway: Did the Wesleyans wish to commence work in Australia? If so, would they accept him as their field worker? The answer was affirmative, and in November, 1945, following his discharge from the Air Force, K. M. Ridgway became the official representative of Wesleyan Methodism in Australia.

In this way a movement that was not only evangelical, but denominational and Wesleyanic rather than Calvinistic, began in Australia.

Early Preparations (1946)

Services were begun in Flinders Lane in the heart of the city of Melbourne, and later transferred to a rented building in Moonee Ponds, a suburb of Melbourne. An aggressive program of street meetings, personal evangelism, and Sunday services resulted in a number of conversions. Contact was made with an evangelical group in Tasmania when Mr. Ridgway spoke at the Easter convention of "Ambassadors for Christ." The year culminated with a convention at Barwon Heads, Victoria, where a small group of interested folk met for prayer and Bible study. On December 23, Miss Grace Wood, a veteran Wesleyan Methodist missionary to India, arrived to assist in the infant work.

Organization (1947)

In February, Tuesday night meetings were held in the heart of Melbourne. They were designed to give those interested in "spreading Scriptural holiness across Australia" an opportunity to meet together and to become acquainted with Wesleyan Methodism. The numbers were small--usually in the twenties. Shortly thereafter, the charter members of the denomination were received and the church was organized.

That year services were begun in Carlton and Sunshine, suburbs of Melbourne; at Bendigo, one of the provincial cities of Victoria, where a disused church was purchased and Leslie Archbold was appointed pastor; and at Cohuna, a country

town located two hundred miles north of Melbourne.

In April, at the request of the Department of Home Missions, under which the Australia field was placed, Mr. Ridgway left for America to attend General Conference and to present the challenge of the new field.

Brother Ridgway's visit was in the nature of a great triumph. He stirred the hearts of his congregations repeatedly with his eloquent messages. The Lord used this humble servant to arouse widespread interest and enthusiasm toward the new project--the 'baby Conference of Australia.'¹

The response of the church was gratifying and resulted in generous prayer and financial interest on the part of the American church. But troubles had come to the home front, and on his return Mr. Ridgway found numbers disaffected. Thus began a period of real sifting and decimation.

Dr. J. R. Swauger visited the field in October to officially ratify the organization and to hold the first Conference. He observed on his arrival that

Our numbers had decreased mightily... The discovery that old-fashioned holiness was not going to be popular among people had a decided effect on those who had at first been drawn by the novelty of the teaching rather than by a desire to accept its cleansing effects.²

At the conference session, which was held in a rented hall in the suburb of Seddon, it became evident that some of the brethren felt that the American control of the church was excessive. One of these withdrew to set up a rival church, but did not succeed.

Dr. Swauger's gracious spirit and anointed messages did much to encourage the faithful members of the church, and to attract newcomers to this strange "sect."

In November, a mansion with several acres was purchased for the sum of \$6000 to be used as a Bible College and headquarters.

On his return, Dr. Swauger left a smaller nucleus of loyal members, but they were a group strengthened in their dedication to their appointed task, and with a clearer vision of their calling.

¹ J. R. Swauger, *The Wesleyan Methodist Church in Australia*, p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

Reinforcements (1948)

Early in the year, the headquarters building was opened as a hostel for single men working or studying in Melbourne. Two of the young men who came were so impressed by the radiant lives of those in charge that they soon joined the church and later entered her ministry.

During the year services were discontinued at Carlton, and transferred to a rented hall in Pascoe Vale, located three miles from the headquarters. "Peace Hall," as it was known locally, became the central meeting place of Wesleyan Methodism for a time.

On November 11, the Leo Cox family arrived from America to open the Bible college. Their arrival brought a new surge of enthusiasm to the workers; and the conference and camp meeting in December resulted in a number of encouraging conversions. Mr. Cox was elected president of the conference in Mr. Ridgway's place.

It remains to observe the reception accorded this baby work in these early days by the already existing religious organizations. As soon as it became clear that a new denomination had entered the field, opposition came from all quarters. Members were frequently informed by representatives of the established churches that there was neither need nor room for a new denomination. Evangelical acquaintances gave those who associated with the Wesleyans the "cold shoulder." Speakers at evangelical interdenominational conventions spoke against this new upsurge of "sinless perfectionism." The evangelical press was closed to the advertisements of the new "sect." In fact, the little group bent on spreading Scriptural holiness across Australia was made to feel very much unwanted, though never really unneeded.

The Period of Prejudice and Clarification (1949-1953)**Entrenchment (1949)**

The outstanding event of the year was the opening of the Melbourne Wesleyan Bible College with three teachers: Rev. Leo Cox, Mrs. Esther Cox, and Rev. K. M. Ridgway, and seven full-time students. Other members of the staff were Miss Wood, and an Australian lady, Miss Bienvenue.

The need for the college had become evident as the work

progressed. Young people were feeling the call to the work. The leading "interdenominational" training school in Melbourne had taken an emphatic public stand against the Wesleyan position. So it became necessary to establish a school true to Wesleyan doctrine and polity for the training of the workers. At its inception, the college became the only Wesleyanic school on the continent.³

Services were begun in the college community during this year under the direction of President Cox, with the assistance of Miss Wood and George Randall. Miss Wood had previously laid a foundation of personal evangelism in the community and had pioneered the Sunday School.

In July, Miss Wood announced that her work in Australia was done, and in August sailed for her homeland. Thus ended almost three years of selfless and devoted labor by this saintly woman. The impact of her life on the community, on the leadership of the conference, and on the students and boarders at the college has been a lasting one. Her victorious spirit, gracious personality, sage counsel, sympathetic ear, anointed testimonies, strict standards, and life of prayerfulness set the pace for Australian Wesleyan Methodism. Dr. Swauger ably summed up her contribution to the foundation of the work thus:

Her devotion to the cause knew no bounds. Her sacrifice was unlimited. Without thought of self, she simply went about doing good. Her unfeigned enthusiasm, her understanding sympathy, and her victorious attitudes, encouraged the rest of us time and time again.⁴

One of the notable contacts of the year was with Mr. Archibald Hughes, a respected teacher among the Plymouth Brethren Assemblies. He had come into the experience of entire sanctification soon after his conversion, and after a long period of Bible study had come to a Wesleyanic theology. Because of his Bible emphasis on the deeper life he was expelled from the Assemblies. Soon afterward he joined the Wesleyans and exerted a leading influence on her policy by becoming Mr. Cox's chief adviser. He brought to the teaching force of

³ The Church of the Nazarene, the only other Wesleyanic church in Australia, was organized about the same time as the Wesleyan Church, but did not open its training college until several years later.

⁴ Swauger, *op. cit.*

the college careful biblical scholarship, though he lacked formal religious education himself.

Development (1950)

Cottage meetings were launched in three suburbs of Melbourne during the year, and two of them--at Balwyn and Highett--were to materialize into churches.

The student enrollment at the college reached fifteen during the year, and the students were active in promoting the cottage meetings.

The first youth camp was held in conjunction with the regular conference and camp meeting on the college campus. There were five organized churches reported that year--four in Melbourne, and one at Cohuna.

Consolidation (1951)

In April, Mr. Cox left the field in charge of Mr. Ridgway and returned to America for General Conference and deputational duties. His untiring representation of the needs and opportunities in Australia resulted in a budget grant by General Conference of twenty-five cents per member for the Australia work. This was equivalent to about \$8000 a year. Hitherto the work had been supported by special offerings, but this had proved to be an impractical method. One-third of the budget receipts were apportioned to the support of the missionary, one-third to the College, and one-third to the Conference. The question of the apportionment was a difficult one, especially when all of the pastors found it necessary to work part-time in order to maintain their families on these pioneer charges. Eventually this financial problem resulted in the withdrawal of several from the church.

During the year Mr. Hughes took on the editorship of *The Wesleyan Witness*, a fortnightly magazine setting forth the Wesleyan message in both a polemic and an apologetic way.

The total membership of the denomination reached fifty-five, a gain of seven over the previous year. The number enrolled in the Sunday Schools was 557, with an average attendance of 310. There were six appointments, four elders, two conference preachers and eight local preachers.⁵

⁵ *Minutes* of the Australia Annual Conference (1951), pp. 19-22.

The year marked the graduation of the first students from the Bible College: James Ridgway, Charles Wilson, and William Morris. These men were soon active in the Conference and all are ordained elders of the church at the present time.

President Cox, in his annual report, stated:

Although progress is slow, we can report an overall growth during the year. We have not added any new churches, but three of our churches show a gain in membership. We have started a new Sunday School at Highett, which shows promise of rapid growth. All of our other Sunday Schools have held steady, or shown an increase in interest and attendance. The Wesleyan Witness is being a great blessing in Australia and America...There were three men graduated from the Bible College.⁶

Clarification of Policy (1952)

An important outcome of the youth camp held in January was the enrollment of three new students in the Bible College. Prospects had not looked promising for the new school year, but enrollment day found eight students present. This was felt to be a definite answer to prayer, and the ministry of the Bible College was continued.

This year was to be a difficult one. Differences over methods caused a schism at Sunshine, and the former pastor launched an opposition work in the same community.

A certain tendency to independence and non-cooperation with the conference program in one of the churches caused considerable difficulty during the year. Hence the visit of Dr. and Mrs. Rufus Reisdorph, denominational representatives from America, was most timely. Mrs. Reisdorph brought great encouragement and blessing by her inspirational ministry. Dr. Reisdorph was able to analyze many of the problems the Conference faced and offered helpful counsel and information.

The Conference marked the beginning of a new era in the work. Up until this time, the policy had been to seek out a program similar to that carried on by the established churches, to follow the traditional "Australian" patterns. It became

⁶ *Ibid.* , p. 14.

clear, however, that there were certain invariables in an evangelical, holiness (Wesleyanic), democratic church which could not be sacrificed without a loss of identity. It was concluded that there were certain hall-marks of Wesleyan Methodism as regards worship and polity, without which she could not be effective in her ministry. This came as a new revelation to the Conference leaders, and from that time on those who rallied around the leadership were wholehearted in their support of the denominational program. The Balwyn church was not satisfied with the trend, and so with their pastor, the Rev. Hughes, eventually withdrew.

Leo Cox was elected president of the Conference, K. M. Ridgway, vice-president, and A. Carnell, secretary, treasurer. Aubrey Carnell and James Ridgway were ordained elders in the Conference. Mr. Carnell had completed the "Course of Study" and Mr. Ridgway had completed the Bible College course, becoming the first graduate of the school to be ordained.

Four elders, four conference preachers, and seven local preachers were listed in the Minutes of that year. The average salary paid the preachers by the local congregations and assisted by American funds was \$590 for the year. A total of \$1650 went into the local churches from this "Overseas Fund." Membership was reported as seventy, with 648 registered on the Sunday School rolls.⁷

Re-alignment (1953)

Aubrey Carnell, who had been pastor of the Cohuna church, replaced James Ridgway as pastor of the College church and took on the responsibility of the business administration of the College. He and his wife as the deans assumed a very strategic place in the school.

The work at Cohuna was closed and a mission church organized a few miles away at Dalton's Bridge under the superintendence of Keith Goulding, a layman. Charles Wilson replaced Mr. Ratcliffe at Sunshine, and James Ridgway was released for graduate studies in the United States of America. A gain of seven members over the previous year was realized. The total enrollment in the Sunday Schools dropped to 441. The number of tithing members was listed as twenty-seven.⁸

⁷ *Ibid.* , pp. 38-42.

⁸ *Ibid.* , p. 75.

The return of the Coxes to America after the Conference of 1953 marked the end of their Australian labors. The Coxes had nobly stepped into a difficult and unmapped area of service and effectively established a pattern of faith, godliness, and procedure in the carrying on of the work of the Kingdom. In so doing, they frequently faced the opposition of those who resented so-called "Americanization," and likewise experienced that loneliness which accompanies isolated leadership. But God gave them grace and courage, and by their lives they vindicated the message they preached.

The Coxes were replaced by the Robert Mattke family from Wisconsin. Mr. Mattke took his theological training at Asbury Theological Seminary. He brought fresh vision and leadership to the Conference and the College.

Consolidation and Expansion (1954-1956)

Broadening the Program (1954)

Under the leadership of Mr. Mattke the Conference launched out on an expanding program. The church-building program was accelerated, and a more intensive promotional campaign was conducted both in Australia and America. The extended outreach through use of Gospel teams, the radio and press, together with timely financial assistance from the American church, brought considerable encouragement to the workers. Mr. Ridgway observed:

It would seem that we have passed through the Winter of obloquy and suspicion and that Spring is coming... Several members who left us in the lean years have come back to humbly acknowledge they never should have left us... The old whispering-campaigns that our teachings are heterodox seem to have abated... Some of us are invited to join the councils of various groups... There is a steady growth of our Sunday Schools... our children's and youth camps are being blessedly used to gather in harvests of young souls... The average age of our members is under thirty years of age... The future of the church in Australia is as 'bright as the promises of God.'⁹

This new optimism was fanned by a fruitful revival at the

⁹ *Wesleyan Missionary* (April, 1954), p. 16.

Sunshine church where there were twenty seekers; by the launching of a building program at Highett; by the graduation from the Bible College in December of seven students--the largest graduating class in the life of the school, and finally by the visit of the international president of the Wesleyan Methodist Church, Dr. Roy S. Nicholson. Dr. Nicholson was employed in a full schedule of speaking engagements by the church and other evangelical bodies, and his ministry did much to commend the high character of the Wesleyan message to Australians.

Dr. Nicholson was struck by the unique religious atmosphere of Australia.

There are many churches here, and also great division of spirit and contentions over minor matters between certain groups; as well as a definite fear of many who desire a genuinely spiritual ministry and message. There is much apathy toward religion by the masses of the Australian people.¹⁰

Some of them /the evangelicals/ have been so disappointed at organized religion that they shrink from it in fear, and suspect that organizations aim to throttle the very message we have to deliver.¹¹

The loss of a group from the Balwyn church was the main cause for a decrease in the membership by seventeen over the previous year. Conference membership was down to thirty-seven, and there were 566 enrolled in the Sunday Schools. Nevertheless, the year closed on a high note of optimism.

Building (1955)

Early in the new year, a door that had been opening for five years was entered. Mr. and Mrs. K. M. Ridgway left the pastorate at West Coburg and launched in faith the pioneering of work in Launceston, second largest city in the island state of Tasmania. By the end of the year Sunday Schools were being conducted in three different locations and central services were held in a rented hall. Cottage prayer meetings were conducted during the week. A tent meeting attracted up to 175 children for a service, but headway with the adults was slow.

¹⁰ *Wesleyan Methodist* (January 26, 1955), p. 51.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, (February 2, 1955), p. 67.

Two churches were built and dedicated during the year. The Hihett church was completed with the help of American funds; Balwyn church was entirely the fruit of the local congregation's labor. The Lord sealed the dedication service when one family was received into membership, and there were nine seekers at the altar.

A spirit of thankfulness and optimism again prevailed at the Conference of 1955. There were three organized churches, and three mission churches. Membership had increased by fifteen, and giving by the churches totalled \$8,375, showing an increase of \$2,814 over the previous year.

Home-trained Personnel (1956)

The sudden death of Mrs. Ridgway following Conference of 1955 came as a great loss to the church. But the seed-sowing in Launceston was not in vain, for by the end of the year a vigorous church of fourteen members was organized under the leadership of Mr. Ridgway, and a suitable property purchased.

Of course, setbacks continued along the way. Mr. Ridgway wrote in April, 1957:

Several are finding the way too narrow, and others are disaffected because we retain infant baptism in the Discipline, and allow women to speak! If only they would not major on minors and minor on majors there would be more hope of revival... Whilst we have lost some, others are coming in. Praise God! There is the usual whispering campaign against us-- 'sinless perfection'--but we are straight and open about what we believe and have nothing to preach but the old-time faith.¹²

But there were many encouragements. In his report on the Conference of 1956, Mr. Ridgway wrote as follows:

We had a wonderful Conference, which closed in a blaze of glory. No place-seeking, all of one heart and soul, and all pushing ahead for the glory of God. We have a good team now--all but two pastors are graduates of the Bible College.¹³

The Bible College

¹²Personal letter dated April, 1957.

¹³Personal letter dated January, 1957.

It is quite clear that there would hardly have been a chance for Wesleyan Methodism to survive the initial struggles for existence apart from the Bible College. Mr. Mattke makes this clear in one of his articles of 1955:

Since its opening in 1949 the College has made a contribution to Wesleyan Methodism in Australia that cannot be computed in monetary terms...In its short history its students have come from fourteen different denominations or independent groups. The College has graduated twelve students. At the present time two of the former students are doing missionary work in New Guinea. Eight former students are doing pastoral work. Others are in nurse or mothercraft training.¹⁴

As the denominational headquarters, the College has been a morale builder, giving stability to the work; as a training school it has established laity and ministers in the fundamentals of the faith, and instilled into them a sense of mission to "spread Scriptural holiness" on the home and foreign fronts; and it has provided the church with a band of dedicated and loyal young men and women who are faithful to the message and mission of the church.

That the appeal of the College has been limited is not surprising. Until now it has been on trial, as any new institution is at its inception. Her clear espousal of the Wesleyan position has greatly limited her potential student appeal in a country basically Calvinistic in its evangelical theology. There is no academic recognition afforded Bible colleges in the Australian education system, and so her appeal is largely to those who already are sympathetic to, or at least interested in, the Wesleyan message.

Nevertheless, students are coming, and the College is filling a vital role in fitting them for fruitful service.

Conclusion

It cannot be truthfully said that the progress of Wesleyan Methodism in the "Land Down Under" has been spectacular. Far from it. But one cannot fail to be convinced that here is a vine of the Lord's planting--one which shows every promise of flourishing into great fruitfulness, under God.

In doctrine, polity, and ethic, she is a true daughter of the

¹⁴ *Wesleyan Methodist*, April and June, 1957.

parent church, and is making her contribution to the religious life of a needy Australia.

Her leaders are young men and women who have courageously taken their stand amidst ostracism and unpopularity, and have dedicated themselves to the "high calling of God in Christ Jesus." They are convinced that God's plan of salvation is "to the uttermost" and they are bent on reaching the religiously disillusioned and unchurched masses with this glorious message. And this they are seeking to do, not by hit-and-miss evangelism, but rather by way of the community church.

God grant that she may realize her divinely appointed mission!