

HISTORY - COROMANDEL VALLEY UNITING CHURCH

BEFORE 1850

From the time that God led him to Coromandel Valley, Mr Samuel Gill was a very busy man. For many of the years of the 1840s, the kitchen of his house there was very busy, too, because it was not only the hub for his own farm and orchard, but also served as a schoolroom for the children of the district and as a place of Christian worship. Besides being farmer, orchardist, gardener, postmaster and school teacher, Gill was also the first accredited preacher in the Valley. His denomination was Baptist, but there is not much doubt that folk from other Churches took advantage of the opportunity to meet in his home in those early years.

Before the end of that decade, other people, whose lifestyles mirrored Gill's, had also begun to open their homes for the purpose of Christian worship and fellowship. Some of these came from Wesleyan traditions and were likely to have had names like Winn or Shepley or Matthews.

FROM 1850 TO 1900

By 1850, they had become organised enough to build a room on land given by the Matthews family and located within the boundaries of the present-day cemetery. The room, itself, was shared as a Church by Wesleyans and Congregationalists, who held their separate services there, and, at other times, it was used as a schoolroom. Although it marks a significant stage in the provision of Church facilities, this arrangement did not last long: by 1857, the Wesleyans had moved their place of meeting to the Shepley home; the connection between them and the local Congregationalists weakened; the children ceased to use the room for learning as some parents were unhappy about its proximity to the expanding cemetery; and the building, itself, which seems to have been not well constructed, was demolished.

By then, the district's Wesleyans had linked up with the Clarendon Wesleyan Circuit, which was large and still growing. A note from the Quarterly Meeting of that Circuit, in 1856, records that, for some of its area, "... the work of God was retarded for want of chapel accommodation and in all a deeper baptism of the Holy Ghost to render the word of God more effectual". So it was that moves began to provide a Church at Coromandel Valley, and it was built near the corner of Ackland Hill Road and Main Road in 1859. It cost about 600 pounds and was given by the people of Clarendon Circuit, free of debt. Christians there had reason to thank God for it for over a hundred years, because it served them until 1998.

The Circuit had only one ordained minister - a state of affairs which pertained for many decades; and so the new Church at Coromandel Valley relied significantly on laymen for preaching. Some of these came from within their own number, some from other parts of the Circuit and others from still more distant parts. Numbers of these visiting preachers travelled by the power of their own two feet, as did Mr Illman who was known to walk from Unley to Cherry Gardens to conduct worship on a Sunday morning and then to stop off and preach at Coromandel later in the day. Others, like Mr Potter from Clarendon, perhaps emulating John Wesley himself, would ride his horse long distances across the Hills in order to preach; even this mode of transport could be hazardous, and history records that Mr Murray, one of the Valley's foremost benefactors, died in a fall from a horse in the area.

The era of the 1850s was a tumultuous one for the whole of Australia, mainly because of the gold rushes. Coromandel Valley did not escape that turmoil, and although the precise effects on families cannot be known, it is sure that significant numbers of its menfolk went off to the diggings. However, the long-term story of the Valley was more influenced by events closer to home. This was the establishing, in it, by Mr Alexander Murray, of a very large and successful jam and biscuit factory, which drew numbers of people to work and live nearby.

The Wesleyan Church was caught up in this growth. Its premises needed to be expanded and the building was lengthened in 1869. The effects of this particular extension continued to be felt right up to 1980, because there was a hump in the floor at the point at which the new joined the old. Anyone who forgot about it was sure to trip, and many did. One regular, over a century later, in the 1970s, stumbled so convincingly that he landed on his knees just in front of the pulpit, impressing the congregation in general with his piety and his family with his clumsiness. In addition, a stable was provided during this period for the comfort of the horses of churchgoers. It was solidly built of stone and was to become notable in different ways many years later. Also significantly, during this period, the Churchyard was used as a graveyard.

As part of the growth, the Church established a Sunday School in 1865, during the time of Rev. J Allen, Superintendent Minister of Clarendon Circuit. From the beginning, it functioned with clear guidelines: there was emphasis on the Bible, John Wesley's sermons and the Catechism; significant time was devoted to prayer; upright moral behaviour was expected from teachers and children; regular attendance and punctuality were encouraged; in addition to regular Sunday meetings, there was an annual Anniversary for which the School painstakingly prepared to sing sacred songs and which always included a weekday tea meeting. By the end of the nineteenth century, the numbers of scholars had risen to about 90. By then, too, the round of activities included a Sunday School picnic, which was usually held at the beach and to which everyone travelled on horse-drawn wagons. In travelling home from these picnics, the revellers customarily dismounted from the wagons once they started to climb on Shepherds Hill Road, so that the horses could manage the steep pull.

The last three decades of the nineteenth century saw marked population growth in the area. The Hills railway was constructed and more land was subdivided in the Valley itself, which gained two more Church buildings - the Anglican and the Baptist. Blackwood began to appear as a distinct community, and, following a meeting in the Coromandel Church to discuss the developments, a Wesleyan Church building was provided at Blackwood. This Church, which was destined to grow rapidly, functioned for many years in partnership with Coromandel Valley.

During this half-century, to the families who had been active from the earliest days in the life of the Church, many more were added. Some of the more prominent and long-serving ones had the names of Turner, Shepherd, Robinson, Hodge, Sheidow, Hill, Dall, Wait, Stevenson, Colmer and Vawser.

FROM 1900 TO 1920

In the year 1900, as a result of prolonged discussion, the various denominations which owed much to the movement begun by John Wesley so many years earlier, amalgamated and called themselves Methodists. So the Clarendon Wesleyan Circuit became the Clarendon Methodist Circuit and Coromandel Valley Wesleyan Church became Coromandel Valley Methodist Church.

In terms of the local community, this event made little difference to the way that things were done. The pattern of regular Sunday worship and annual events like the Sunday School picnics, anniversaries and tea meetings continued. It is true that the Ladies Guild, which was to become the Women's Fellowship of later times, appeared in these years. There were also excuses for more festive occasions than usual, because both the Church (1909) and the Sunday School (1915) celebrated their jubilees. For these, there were grand concerts in which the whole community became involved. There was, in fact, a clear understanding that the Church was central to the local community and it provided a focus for much of that community's life.

Other names were added to the list of those significantly active in the Church: Summers, Light, Jones, Scroop, Nicolle. The building expanded, too, with the addition of a stone Sunday School room at the back, in 1905, and a small room used for the younger children which was added to the side in 1910. This latter

was constructed with its northern wall inside the boundary of the property next door, on land which was being developed into an orchard by the Magarey family.

A significant level of cooperation and sharing was evident between the Methodists and Baptists of the Valley by this time. They combined for their picnics, deferred to one another in celebration of key events, changed fairly freely from one congregation to the other, clung to family ties which linked them, and shared some physical resources. One of these was the large scaffolding for supporting tiers of planks to serve as seats during Sunday School anniversary times. The height of this structure was, for many years, marked on the wall of the Methodist building by a greasy line where the boys on the top row had leant their oiled hair as they sat patiently through the services.

FROM 1920 TO 1950

The year 1920 marked an organisational change for Churches in the area. Coromandel Valley and Blackwood separated from the Clarendon Circuit and between them formed the Blackwood Methodist Circuit.

Many more names of families were added to those of former times and numbers of them gave significant service over a long time: Magarey, Moulden, Watchman, Colmer, Gamble, Scherer, Hall. In the early stages of the era, about 50 people were in the congregation each week.

Most of the established traditions continued as they had for past decades, with some minor changes. Sharing between the Baptists and Methodists continued. The annual schedules of tea meetings, anniversaries and picnics rolled on. One minor change in relation to the picnics was that, instead of using horses and wagons for the annual trip to the beach, the participants now rode on Mr Bill Moulden's truck. Some of the older hands, for a long time, insisted on clambering off the tray when they came to the Hills in order to provide the same kind of relief for the truck as they had for the horses in previous years.

Laymen still provided much of the preaching, some from within the Circuit and some from outside. One, Mr Perc Doley who was a chaff merchant, is still remembered by some because he came often to preach with the products of his trade clinging to his hair. It seems that the children of the day paid more attention to that fact than to the substance of his sermons. Another, Mr Bill Parish, came from as far away as Forestville and he rode his bicycle up into the Hills for each occasion. It was also at this stage that the Burnside name became significant to Coromandel people, as members of that family from Blackwood began a long history of helping the Valley Church.

One addition to the Church in the early part of this era was the Church organ. It was large and impressive and the air for generating its sound came from bellows which were pumped by means of a manually operated handle. That feature saved the organist some exertion, but provided plenty of exercise for the young boys of the congregation, like David and Roger Magarey, who spent many hours pumping wearily, always anxious about certain hazards: that the bellows leaked; that the catch securing the handle might slip; that certain organists demanded extra effort because they played loudly. The hand pump remained until 1959, when it was replaced with a second-hand, vacuum cleaner motor which was still in working order when the organ was sold in 1998.

When the Great Depression struck the world in 1929, Coromandel Valley felt the impact along with every other place in Australia. Church people helped each other over the lean years, but also found time to work for the relief of others. The women and children, for example, sewed and knitted to provide clothing which was distributed through the Methodist Missions in the City of Adelaide and at Port Adelaide. Of particular help was the old stable at the Church. Not needed much for horses by this time, it was a welcome haven for the swagmen who tramped the countryside. Although open on one side, it still provided shelter from the prevailing winds, and, over the few years of the Depression, its interior walls

became blackened with smoke from the many fires over which the swagmen cooked and warmed themselves. During all this time, the Church building was never locked - and there was never any theft or vandalism.

After World War 2, numbers at the Coromandel Valley Church began to decline, so that by 1950, there were only about 25 names on the roll, and, on some Sundays, the congregation might be less than 5 people. Those who remained no doubt wondered about the future of the little Church.

FROM 1950 TO 1970

This Twenty-year period was one of struggle.

The Methodist Circuit now consisted of Coromandel Valley, Blackwood, Belair and Eden Hills, and by 1957, the Valley Church was so small that the others believed that it should be closed and its resources distributed: the organ, for example, was to go to Belair and the building materials to the new Church building soon to be opened at Eden Hills. However, the few families at Coromandel Valley resisted these moves and the Church remained. Thus there was maintained a fellowship of God's people that would eventually provide a "home" for many others in subsequent years.

Their small numbers had to handle the whole business of keeping the Church doors open, and the occasions for volunteer work were many. Maintenance of the property, alone, took a great deal of time, and tasks like hunting for trespassing possums in the old ceiling were tricky. Other things needed attention, too: the old bell which had hung, for longer than anyone could remember in a nearby gum tree, had become silent because the tree had grown around it to hem it in. It was set free by suspending it from an old truck chassis fixed into a more open fork in the same tree, where it was used to call folk to worship until the time came for it to be moved and fixed onto a cairn at a new site almost half a century later. The earthquake of 1954 also caused problems as one wall was badly damaged. The contractor who came to repair it found that his scaffolding was not strong enough because the roof, itself, was so heavy, consisting of a layer of iron over shingles. But the repairs were eventually made and the Church's life continued. In fact, it expanded in some ways. For example, in 1957, the women got together to form a Women's Fellowship, under the leadership of Mrs Rosemary Magarey, to fill the gap left by the Ladies Guild which had not functioned for a few years. Among its annual activities, it soon included a Christmas party for the older people of the district - a valuable tradition which still continues.

Slowly, growth came. The congregation began to increase in size, and, by 1970, names such as Walker (Bessie Moulden), Williamson, Corbett, Litchfield, Holden, Chapman, Overbeeke, Moore and Archibald were added to the list of previous leaders such as the Magareys, Mouldens, Winns, Gambles and Halls. The Sunday School, which had closed down, opened again under the leadership of Mr John Vawser, and an old prefabricated building was purchased to house its activities; it was, incidentally, placed over some of the graves which were unmarked as they had by now lost their wooden crosses.

FROM 1970 TO 2000

From about 1970, the increase in the size of the congregation was significant and it continued to grow. Some reasons for this increase are clear: land subdivision in the district led to more houses; there emerged a trend for some families to move to the Hills to seek a less suburban environment; Coromandel Valley Church began to draw on an area much wider than its own local community.

Whatever the discernable causes, God kept the Church under His hand, just as He had in earlier times in order to build and preserve it, and He now led it into a period of growth. Before many years of the 1970s had passed, more names were added to the list of those families who would serve for significant periods:

Kelly, Smith, Potter, Winter, Byrne, Elford, Turner, Chapman, Freeman, Spencer, Dutton, Francis, Parker, Skewes, Hayman.

In the mid-1970s, the decision was taken to provide a pastor whose first responsibility would be to Coromandel Valley; until this time, the Minister appointed primarily to Blackwood had included the Valley in his pastorate. The first man appointed under the new arrangement was a student pastor, Mr Richard Miller, and he was followed in subsequent years by ordained men - Rev. Arthur Jackson, Rev. Rodney James and Rev. Deane Meatheringham. The fact of having "resident" ministers was very significant. Their responsibility extended to Cherry Gardens and Iron Bank, and each of them brought valued and dynamic gifts to the task.

The number of regular worshippers increased (to about 400 by the year 2000), and the little building reached the stage where it could only house them by holding two services each Sunday morning. A youth group also grew up, first of all under the leadership of Mr David Potter; it soon became a very large and active body, which attracted many young people from a wide variety of backgrounds. The pastoral and administrative work expanded along with all this growth, and extra help was needed to cope with it. Much of this was handled in unofficial and informal ways as a network of vibrant home groups was established. A Council of Elders also carried some of the increased load, but, to take care of other aspects of the work, particular staff were employed, among them Mr Ray Elford, Mrs Ros Byrne, Mr Colin Beaton, Mr Gordon Martin, Mr Simon Moore, Mrs Catherine Moore and Mr Geoff Hill.

There was also a series of organisational changes in this period. In 1977, the Uniting Church came into being as the result of the combining of the Methodists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists. What had been the Blackwood Methodist Circuit now became the Blackwood Uniting Church Parish. Soon, the Aberfoyle Park, Flagstaff Hill, Cherry Gardens and Iron Bank Churches were added to this, and in 1986, the Parish divided into two as population growth continued. Coromandel Valley Church found itself part of the Southern Hills Parish, along with Aberfoyle Park, Flagstaff Hill, Iron Bank and Cherry Gardens. In the early 1990s, Aberfoyle Park and Flagstaff Hill formed a separate Parish and then, in the year 2000, each of the Churches remaining in the Southern Hills Parish - Coromandel Valley, Iron Bank and Cherry Gardens - became a separate Parish in its own right.

Amidst this rather bewildering sequence of changes, the physical arrangements at Coromandel Valley were altered, too. In the mid-1970s, voluntary labour under the guidance of Mr Ron Williamson provided a new toilet block and changed the old stable, which was still, thereafter, affectionately called simply "The Stable", into a comfortable meeting room. In 1980, the original Church building underwent extensive changes and refurbishment; among other things, a new floor was installed and the hump which had characterised the old one disappeared. A new timber framed building replaced the old Sunday School and an additional shed was erected. In order for all this to happen more easily, the Magarey family donated to the Church a strip of land where the room built in 1910 had overlapped onto their orchard. Finally, in 1998, the Church was led from its old home into a newly constructed, 400-seat Church building, still in Coromandel Valley, on the corner of Main Road and Crane Avenue. The site includes the former Baptist Church, lies a short distance from the spot where Samuel Gill had his home and is just 200 metres from the place where the first service was held in the old combined church-school 150 years ago.

In contemplating the Coromandel Valley Uniting Church of the year 2000, we look back with gratitude to God for what He has provided, and also gladly acknowledge the obedience and faithfulness of those people who have worked to maintain the fellowship there.

Written by Max Winter September 2000 ... with considerable help from David and Rosemary Magarey and Rose Mitchell