

CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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THE BEGINNINGS OF A LOCAL CHURCH

...the early history of Chatswood Church of Christ



Evangelist Thomas Bagley
first minister at Chatswood Church of Christ

by
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The Conference of Churches of Christ in NSW will consider for publication short papers on historical and theological topics relevant to the development of Churches of Christ. The publication of as paper does constitute an official endorsement of the views expressed therein

WHEN DOES A GROUP OF BELIEVERS BECOME A CHURCH?

....the early history of Chatswood Church of Christ

Local church anniversaries always raise the question of when, in human terms, they actually began. Does it begin when two or three “gather together in His name” or when the first communion service is held, or when it becomes self sufficient or when it is admitted to some denominational association? In 2014, Chatswood Church of Christ celebrates its centenary. But it had a history before 1914.

Thomas Bagley’s inaugural ministry at Paddington was a comprehensive experience for the young theological college graduate because it involved growing a small congregation, relocating it and overseeing the building of a chapel. He was to use all this experience in his later ministries. In September 1905, after his service at Paddington, Bagley accepted appointment as the State Evangelist in NSW. In that capacity he became involved in initial moves to establish a church on the mid-North Shore.

For much of 1906, Bagley was based at North Sydney. He conducted missions at Lismore, Inverell, Moree and Erskineville. But he spent most of his time with the North Sydney church where he conducted two substantial missions and filled the pulpit there when not preaching elsewhere. North Sydney was regarded by Bagley and the Home Missions Committee as being strategically important to Sydney’s North Shore. Services were conducted in the Masonic Hall in Walker Street.

Bagley’s second mission at North Sydney was extended into mid November 1906, delaying by a fortnight or so his appointment to the ministry of the historic church at Lygon Street, Melbourne. Lygon Street agreed to delay Bagley’s appointment so that the full fruits of this last mission could be realised. The mission resulted in 46 confessions of faith. When Bagley left North Sydney the church had a membership of over 100, was moving towards the appointment of its own evangelist and acquiring its own meeting place.

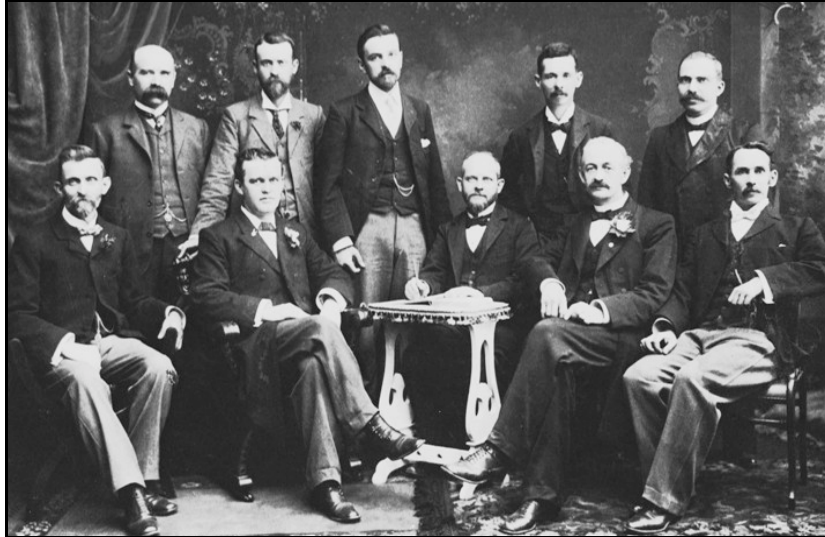
In the course of his time at North Sydney, Bagley became aware of members living in the Chatswood area and considered there was a sufficient nucleus (as many as 20 persons) to form a church. In early 1906 a hall was rented – it might have been the old School of Arts – and services were begun. Bagley reported in *The Australian Christian* on 26 April 1906 as follows:

A nice hall has been secured and nine members met for the first time last Lord’s Day to break bread in this popular suburb. The writer conducted the morning service and W. Macindoe preached at night and it is expected that a tent mission will be held in a few months time. Alf Baker, “Yarrowonga” Daisy Street, Chatswood is the secretary.

In one of those ironies of history, the elderly Walter Macindoe and his wife retired to Chatswood over thirty years later and entered fully into the fellowship. Mrs. Eva Wrigley was his daughter

Within days of his finishing up at North Sydney, Bagley was inducted at Lygon Street, Melbourne. Lygon Street was an old established area and ministry there required a

different approach to that at Paddington or North Sydney. But he was equally successful. He entered fully into the wider life of Churches of Christ in Victoria and was appointed Conference President. His vigorous promotion of the wider cause in Victoria and his experience in NSW led to his appointment as Home Missions Organiser in 1909.



NSW Home Missions Committee in 1902/1903. Thomas Bagley is in the back row, far right. Walter Macindoe is in the back row second from the left. (from Jubilee history)

In the course of the next two years he visited many areas of the state, organising churches and conducting missions. A notable enterprise was the erection of the chapel-in-a-day at Preston in 1911. This remarkable exercise of organisation and co-operation involved the mobilisation of hundreds of workers from around Melbourne. Importantly, it brought Bagley into contact with builder Alf Graham who was given oversight of the chapel's construction. It was a strong partnership.

Bagley returned to Sydney in 1912 as minister of the City Temple, Sydney church and reconnected with the NSW Home Missions Committee. He became President of the NSW Conference in 1913. Bagley was living at Glebe, at the time within reasonable walking distance of the church at Surry Hills.

In his absence from the state, little progress had been made at Chatswood. It is known that the Home Missions Committee endeavoured to provide speakers for the little church. John Crawford visited there on several occasions. Plans for a tent mission were discussed and an attempt was made to link the Chatswood group in a partnership with the little church emerging at Hornsby. But that was never likely to be viable; Hornsby, some ten kilometres away, had its own problems.

In *The Australian Christian* of 3/1/1907 there is an acknowledgement of a receipt by the NSW Home missions Committee of the sum of £5/10/- from Chatswood. That was a substantial amount of money and may have been a voluntary offering, or the reimbursement of expenses incurred by the Committee at Chatswood the previous year. Either way it was an indication of some viability.

At the Conference of April 1907 there was a report from the H.M. Committee that “small bands of brethren meeting in Belmore, Chatswood and Hornsby look to us for aid”. However a report in *The Australian Christian* of 25 April 1907 raises doubts about the future of the work at Chatswood. A Home Missions report indicates a donation “per A. Baker” to the North Sydney Building Fund of £2/8/- “representing the balance of the Chatswood Meeting Fund”. This suggests the winding up of the Chatswood cause and an intention to support North Sydney as a hub church. In July 1907, Baker was still listed in the Australasian directory of Churches of Christ as being the representative/secretary of the church at Chatswood. The entry does not reappear after that. It appears that he left the district¹.

During his time as minister at City Temple and as NSW Conference President, Bagley was reminded again of the importance of Chatswood as a strategic centre. He was aware of the movement of population to the area and of members of his own congregation who were travelling in from the suburb. No Harbour Bridge existed, and the journey to the city church involved travel by train, ferry and tram. Membership loss was a possibility.

The Australian Christian of 27 November 1913 reports on a meeting to be held on 29 November to consider the advisability of starting a cause at Chatswood. It was indicated that about 40 members lived with easy reach of Chatswood. The meeting was organised by the Northern Suburbs Conference Committee. It is not known whether Bagley attended that meeting, but as Conference President, he probably did.

Around this time Bagley and his family relocated their home to Chatswood. That move was probably in anticipation of some arrangement with the Home Missions Committee. In the event the Home Missions Committee commissioned him to organise a church in the district.

The rest of the story is fairly well documented and is not recounted here in detail. In January 1914 a meeting was held in the “Literary Institute” (possibly the School of Arts) at Chatswood and Bagley resigned from City Temple. In March 1914 the church was formed. It was admitted to Conference in April 1914 with 21 members, with 20 Bible School scholars. In anticipation of erecting a building he persuaded his friend and associate in the chapel-in-a-day venture in Victoria, Alf Graham, to come to Sydney and oversee the building process. The Graham family came and, for over sixty years, contributed magnificently to the ministry of the church.

¹ Alf Baker was the subject of an obituary which appeared in *The Australian Christian* on 6.4.1911. A railway worker, he moved around the state and died at Murrurundi at 42 years of age. His body was brought to Sydney for interment. A graveside service was conducted by Sydney ministers A.E. Illingworth and J.J. Franklyn. The obituary was written by John Crawford, one of those who occasionally conducted services at Chatswood. No relatives are mentioned, but the funeral arrangements Crawford’s glowing obituary suggest that he was held in good repute within Churches of Christ.



Alf Graham, 1911

In conjunction with Alf Graham, Bagley paid a deposit of £5.0.0 on a double block of land in Victoria Avenue. However, Bagley refused to allow a building to be erected until the debt on the land was liquidated. Bagley knew that a small church saddled with large debt had difficulty in sustaining a ministry. He vigorously promoted the needs of the church around the state and appealed for funds. His standing as a Conference President and a former state evangelist would have facilitated this.

Bagley was a great planner and organiser but he was not averse to “getting down and dirty”. A good carpenter, he assisted in the building process but in addition conducted a door-knocking campaign in the district. He used a bicycle to undertake visitation. He believed presentation was important and, within the limits of his small stipend², he dressed neatly. His daughter Edna recalled him coming home with the cuffs of his trousers torn by dogs, and of her mother May painstakingly mending them.

The outbreak of the Great War in July 1914 cast a shadow over events. A major transport strike linked to the war made movement around Sydney almost impossible. But the work went ahead. Out on the streets of Chatswood Bagley campaigned vigorously. When preaching, he usually wore a dress coat and out of doors, a bowler hat. With a dapper moustache, he bore a faint resemblance to the German Kaiser Wilhelm. Larrikins in the crowd chucked him endlessly, calling him “Kaiser Bill”. But they listened, and some came.

The weatherboard and fibro chapel was opened in September 1914. In March 1915 the Building Committee of Conference refused a request for a short term loan of £100 because no funds were available but a kindly “brother” loaned the church £20 on an interest free basis. In this way, progress was made.

By the end of the Conference year in April 1915 membership had grown to 60 and there were 72 scholars in the Bible School. A Junior Christian Endeavour Society was formed and Bagley used the Endeavourers to help deliver handbills. Thus, only twelve months after its commencement, the church had grown sufficiently to be self supporting and the Home Missions Committee was relieved of all financial support.

² The advertised salary for the State Evangelist in 1912 was £3.0.0 per week



Thomas Bagley and a Christian Endeavour or Sunday School group sitting outside the new chapel. Sitting on Bagley's left is Frank Woodward. Third from the left in the back row is Bagley's daughter Edna. Edna Bagley and Frank Woodward were among the first to be baptised in the new chapel. Woodward's baptismal certificate is dated 27 September 1914. Edna and Frank were honoured by sharing in the key turning ceremony when the Chapel in the Chase was opened in 1984

In February 1918, Bagley accepted an invitation to return to the work of Home Missions organising in Victoria. He died in Victoria in 1924 working almost to the end. He was only 53 years of age. He never lost his passion for evangelism. Among his last words to his family were "If I had a thousand lives to live, I'd live them all in the service of the Master".

Bagley was succeeded in April 1918 by Joseph Whelan. Whelan was an outstanding preacher. He had a heart for social work and was an effective pastor. He gained visibility in the district – not by preaching to crowds from the back of a cart – but by regularly walking up and down Victoria Avenue and talking to shopkeepers and passers by. This might be referred to as "ministry by walking around". In almost twenty years of ministry he became well known and it is said that the town flag at Willoughby flew at half-mast when he died in 1938. At the time of his death the membership of the church was over 300. His story and that of many other wonderful preachers who served at Chatswood also remains for another place. So one lays a foundation, and another builds on it.

So when does a local church start? When a group of believers make their first faltering steps, when it engages a preacher, when it erects a building or when it is admitted to denominational connection? The church which celebrates its centenary in 2014 was long in gestation but planted well. The Conference of Churches of Christ in NSW congratulates the Chatswood church on attaining a ripe maturity, and for its outstanding contribution over the years.

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