

Our Story – The Reed Memorial Mission Church (Now Gateway Baptist)

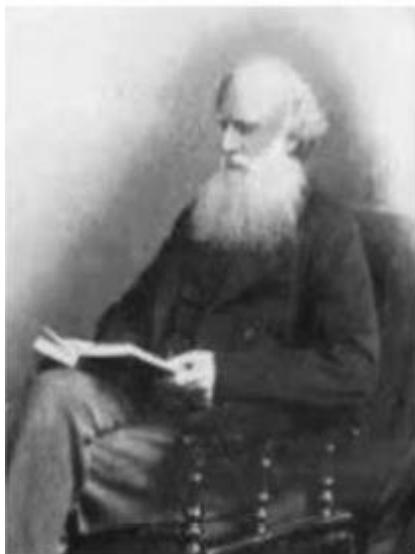
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Timeline

1876	Henry Reed purchases Parr’s hotel and renovates skittle alley; he eventually replaces it with the red brick hall at the back of Gateway Church
Dec 1879	Rev. JH Shallberg appointed
Oct 1880	Henry Reed dies, and Margaret Reed takes charge of the work
July 1882	Weatherboard Pavilion opened
188?	Margaret appoints singing preacher, the Rev. DW Hiddlestone
188?	Church builds Evangelistic Hall in Evandale
1884	Christian Mission Church has 300 members
July 1885	Memorial Church opened – commissioned by Margaret in memory of Henry Reed
May 1886	Rev. George Soltau appointed
Feb 1896	Rev. James Tanner Piercey appointed (moves to Burnie by 1904)
Feb 1905	Rev. Edward Isaac
19??	Rev. Samuel Harrison
1916-1922	Rev. Malcolm McOmish

In the last few years, the catch cry among Tasmanian Baptists has been “Be Missional”. Yet some of our churches began with their own version of this. Take the Reed Memorial Church in Launceston (now Gateway Baptist). It began as a missional church, missional in the sense they understood it at the time.

None of its Pastors would have been considered for the task unless they had that outlook. One hundred years ago its Pastor was the Rev. Malcolm McOmish “with his powerful gospel message[s] punctuated with telling illustrations” who began at the church in February 1916 and stayed for six years. He had been brought out from Scotland with the Queensland Evangelism Society on an Australia-wide basis. Following his time at Memorial, he reverted back to being a full-time evangelist, now on the international scene.



Fifty years earlier Wesleyan Missioner Henry Reed (pictured) returned to Tasmania from England “full of religious zeal”. He began street preaching and used his wealth gained through whaling, sealing and general trading to purchase Parr’s Hotel in Wellington Street for a mission. In 1876, he had the long shed, used as a skittle alley behind the hotel, renovated and seats installed, and thus the Christian Mission Church became a reality. Reed replaced the skittle alley with a rear brick building, which is still there today.

Following his death in October 1880 widow, Margaret, took charge of the work. A new weatherboard pavilion, with seating for nearly 1000, was soon erected between the former hotel and the rear brick building and it opened in July 1882. An average of 600 would regularly worship there Sunday

mornings. In the evenings it was full to overflowing. The church also erected the "Evangelistic Hall" in Evandale.

By 1884 the Christian Mission Church had 300 members. Finally, in memory of her husband, Margaret Reed commissioned the present imposing Memorial Church seating 1200. It was opened in July 1885. Church life consisted of more than Sunday services. There were special evening services on specific subjects during the working week, street marches with the Christian Mission Band of Hope, soup-kitchens and sit-down meals for the poor and various community groups.

During the time of the temporary pavilion, Margaret Reed appointed the singing preacher, the Rev. DW Hiddlestone, to replace the German evangelist, the Baptist Rev. JH Shallberg who had commenced in December 1879. In England, Hiddlestone had evangelized with singer Corrie Johnstone. It was reported that Hiddlestone's well thought out sermons were delivered "with much pathos and power". Here the *Examiner* added, "His sermons are strictly confined to gospel lines."

Hiddlestone was replaced in May 1886 by a Christian Brethren missionary, the Rev. George Soltau. His wife, Grace, became the first president of the Tasmanian Woman's Christian Temperance Union, and she and her Christian sisters were responsible for Launceston's first successful rescue home. Pastor Soltau was not a vigorous or forcible speaker, but he was a very earnest one, and had a good voice and sympathetic manner.

Primitive Methodist, the Rev. James Tanner Piercey followed in February 1896. He was born in Geelong in Victoria. In 1904, he became pastor of the Burnie Baptist Church until he took up full-time evangelistic work.

In February 1905 the Rev. Edward Isaac from Spurgeon's Pastors' College took charge. It was said of him, "His theological compass did not vary by a single point—the loadstone of the Cross held him from the beginning or his ministry to its end."

Another Spurgeon man followed, the Rev. Samuel Harrison who had married into one of the leading families of the Launceston Tabernacle. Prior to his entry into Spurgeon's, from Primitive Methodist roots, he worked as a travelling evangelist. His expository preaching showed "a keen, logical thinker and a forceful evangelist".

Editorial Note

It has to be admitted that the preaching once heard at the Reed Memorial Church, used so effectively to tell people about Jesus, has lost its persuasiveness. If we keep using methods that worked for them to talk to people outside the Christian faith about Jesus, we might see some fruit, but we can be quite certain that we'll lose the vast majority, and we'll lose the vast majority under the age thirty-five. In the post-Christian, post-modern age in which we live, the methods of evangelism have to change in order to keep the mission alive.

The Evangelism of yesteryear was mostly about helping people find answers but, often, in the process of providing an answer, it failed to really embrace their questions. In our day we need foremost to listen to people's questions seriously and try to respond thoughtfully and helpfully.

And in listening we need to do it without judgment thus affirming a person's intentions. As we listen, without judging, we should gently steer the conversation back toward truth. We should never shut down the conversation telling them they're wrong.

So a case can be made that the evangelism of Memorial's early days was carried with a tone of arrogance, smugness and superiority. Such arrogance is still so ingrained in many Christian cultures

that Christians don't even see or hear it anymore. But it was humility that made Jesus so much more attractive to people than the Pharisees who lacked it.

Arrogance is only ever attractive to the arrogant. We should not add to the world's divisions by proclaiming our superiority to sinful humanity. We should never forget that we were once the prodigal son, the adulterous woman and, as with Paul "the foremost of sinners". Spreading the kingdom does not mean hell-fire evangelism; it means living a Christ-like life.

In the past, revivalists sought to conclude everything within the hour – hear the message, respond to the message, acknowledge your sin, repent and commit. Increasingly, evangelism doesn't work that way. People who come to faith when pressured often leave it. And conversely, people who come to faith in their own timeline tend to be flourishing years on.

It took Jesus' disciples three years to figure out who He was, so we too need to go on a journey with people. True, we are not to lose our sense of urgency in the mission, but we need to give people space, and we need to give the Holy Spirit space to do His work. It is not that high-pressure evangelism never works, or that God has stopped using it entirely, but it is increasingly less effective and that other methodology given above shares the same end and appears to be even more effective.

LF Rowston

For this article I have drawn on Australian church historian Robert Evans and the North American pastor, the Rev. Carey Nieuwhof, the latter for evangelism pointers. – Laurie Rowston (MA – UTAS)