

The Sheffield Baptist Church Revival, 1923-24

Published in **ADVANCE: Together in Mission**, December 2019

As Tasmanian Baptists grapple with what it means to be a missional church, it is good to pause, reflect, and learn from our past. In 1923, well over 100 people came to Christ during an unprecedented revival at Sheffield Baptist. Hallelujah!

Sadly, the revival also caused a church split. The question is, what would happen if any of our churches experienced that sort of growth in 2020? Let's pray that this time, we would maintain the unity Jesus won for us:

"I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one ... I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me." John 17:21-23 (NIV).

Some years ago, the Rev. Dr Damon Adams who is currently Senior Lecturer in Theology, Biblical Studies and Church History at Alphacrucis College, Hobart Campus, sought information from me on the events at Sheffield Baptist in 1924.

He was researching for an article on the Sheffield Revival of 1923-24 and the article was recently published in the journal "Lucas, an Evangelical History Review", (No. 11, June 2018). For our own education as Tasmanian Baptists here is a summary of what he wrote, making use of some of his conclusions.

Such an article is timely as some of Pentecostal influence is seen in our Sunday-by-Sunday services as folk fervently hold up their hands and close their eyes during the singing of certain words and phrases in our songs.

It is also timely as a number of our churches embraced something of the "Toronto Blessing" of the mid-1990s.



The Sheffield Baptist Church at the time of Henry Ebenezer Saunders first time at Sheffield. c 1912

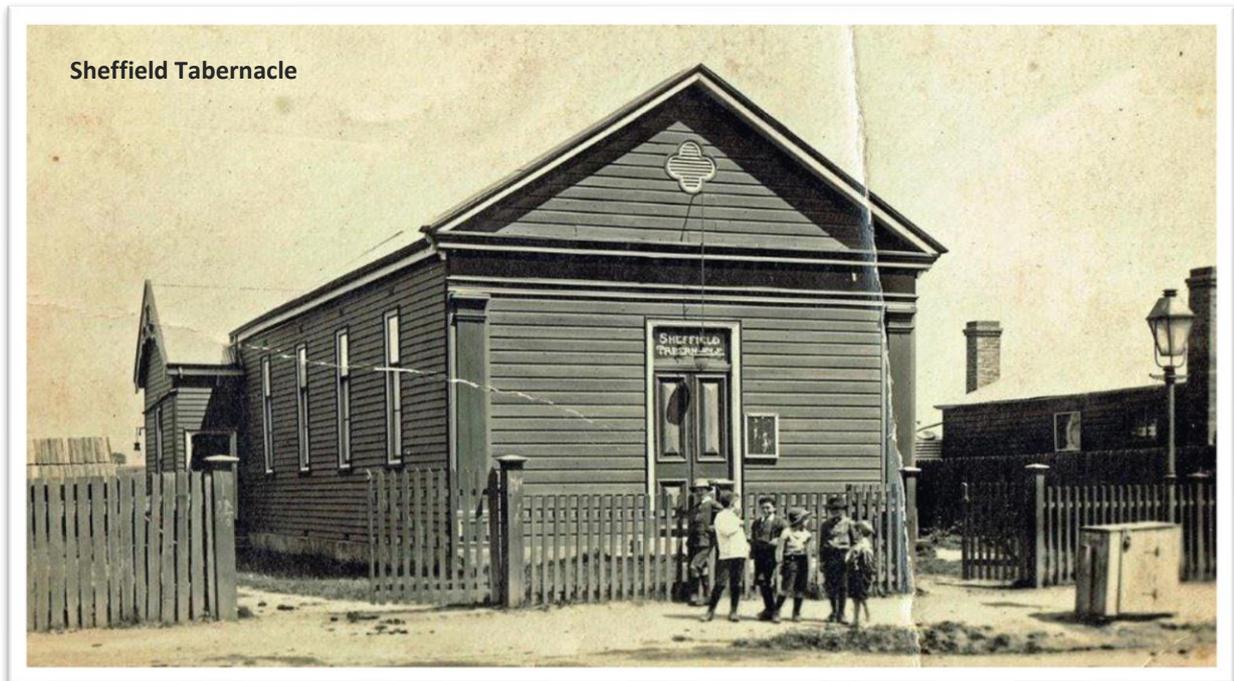
[The Beginnings](#)

The two leading characters are the Rev Henry Ebenezer Saunders and his son H. (Neil) MacNeil Saunders. Victorian-born Henry was converted under the preaching of the well-known Presbyterian evangelist, the Rev John MacNeil. Shortly after his conversion, Henry pursued a call to the ministry with the Victorian Baptist Home Mission. Then, in Queensland he continued his involvement with

the Baptist churches and became very good friends with the Rev W. L. Jarvis, who later became a leading Australian Baptist evangelist.

In 1910 Henry pastored the Baptist church in the Tasmanian suburb of Moonah for twelve months. Followed by the joint pastorate of Latrobe and Sassafras Baptist churches.

In early 1914 Henry was called to Sheffield Baptist Church but, because of the onset of WWI, he made an early departure. His involvement in the emerging Pentecostal movement ensued.



In his youth Henry's son, Neil, was greatly influenced by the Pentecostal movement through of a friend in the Queensland YMCA who demonstrated the extraordinary gifts of speaking and interpreting tongues following, what he said, was his baptism in the Holy Spirit.

Neil's own Pentecostal experiences in turn influenced his father's theology and behaviour. One thing is clear – by the time of the commencement of the Henry's second term in Sheffield, they were both distinctly Pentecostal in outlook.

[Saunders' Second Term in Tasmania — Revival and Controversy](#)

At the end of May 1923, Henry commenced a second term at Sheffield. At the outset, Saunders requested that his son be appointed assistant pastor in order to ensure that the various outposts of the church district could be adequately supported. Within two months a revival broke out.

[Church growth](#)

The Minutes of the Deacons' Meeting of 21 July 1923 reads:

Pastor Saunders reported a great revival at Staverton and Beulah there being 80 converts. We thank God that everywhere our churches, outstations and centre are showing increased activity since the coming of Pastor and Mrs Saunders and family.

By late September, Saunders reported having conducted a successful mission at Cethana, 20km from Sheffield, where “a time of great blessing was experienced”. This was soon followed by 49 applicants for membership, and four for baptism and membership.

It was around this time that the Sheffield Diaconate recommended to the church that Neil Saunders be formally appointed as assistant pastor. In the Sheffield Baptist Church News October 1923, a glowing report was given to the congregation of the continuing revival:

The result has been a great outpouring of God's power to save, as we know of no less than 108 persons who have yielded their lives to Him ... four baptismal services in three months, with 10 sisters and 19 brothers baptised... great power and blessing.

Days later, the revival had resulted in 119 persons having accepted Jesus as their Saviour.

Objections and division

But coinciding with the revival was a serious division in the church. At the centre of the division were three influential deacons.

There were a number of objections raised but at the heart of the strife were the Pentecostal elements that seem to have been part of the revival. The main cause of division within the church was that some were rejoicing at the conversions and renewal, and others were concerned at the seeming excesses.

Even so the revival resulted in an increase in the number of members at Sheffield by 59, along with “a wonderfully improved spiritual tone of the outstations” and a marked increase in the church's finances.

The split resulted in the three deacons resigning and pursuing a complaint with the Baptist Union. In addition, they raised a number of complaints which, writes Dr Adams, “were all designed to undermine the ministry of both Henry and Neil Saunders.” Four church members resigned, including the Secretary of the diaconate. Also, the Baptist Union appears to have cautiously sided with the former deacons.

Consequently, in January 1925, Henry submitted his resignation which took effect in May 1925. This was preceded by the resignation of his son, Neil.

Following their removals, Neil was accepted as a student Pastor at Maldon Baptist Church in Victoria. He later became a Pentecostal evangelist and author. Neil then moved to a Presbyterian ministry where he had an influential career.

There is no record of the occurrence of any Pentecostal activity on his part as a Presbyterian.

Henry was in Victoria for two years after his second stint in Tasmania. From Victoria he returned to Queensland where he saw out his days in active service in the Baptist Churches.

Again, there are no further reports of any Pentecostal activity in Henry's pastorates in Queensland.

Back in Sheffield, the Baptist church and the Union were quick to invite back those who had resigned from membership and restore the former deacons back into office. There were those who felt the loss of Saunders' departure and even a decade later, remembered fondly the revival.

[Dr Damon Adams' Conclusions](#)

Dr Adams writes,

“The Saunders strong evangelicalism with a passion for Keswick-style holiness, evangelistic fervour and ardent commitment to dispensational premillennialism had brought them to experience empowerment attributed to the baptism of the Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues, but a relationship between Pentecostal pneumatology and Evangelical revivalism, which was evident in the revival, was a concept too difficult for traditional Evangelicals to accept.

“Through (the Rev.) E. B. Woods, the Pastor of Burnie Baptist Church, the Baptist Union made an effort to ensure there would be little room for a repeat of any Pentecostalism within the Baptist churches of northwest Tasmania. In a message on the 'The Personal Ministry of the Holy Spirit', E.B. Woods taught the traditional Reformed view that regeneration is the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and he attacked Pentecostals and Pentecostalism.

Further, Woods taught the Reformed view that the filling of the Holy Spirit is part of sanctification: ‘The secret of a Spirit-filled life is that we ‘trust and obey’ the Lord Jesus Christ as our Saviour and Master.’ Woods further surmised that little groups within the Christian Church fasten on to a few familiar New Testament phrases such as ‘The baptism of the Spirit’, and make them into something like the watchwords and badges of a party. ‘This is the mistake of the ‘Pentecostalist’ Church,’ added Woods. Woods continued, ‘The doctrine of the Holy Spirit has been taken up into the clouds, too often regarded us a matter for a select few, who can give more time and trouble to the cultivation of the Spiritual life. It has been connected with certain mystical notions which soar far above the heads of the average Christian and relate themselves somehow to the experiences of Pentecost. There is a craze for supernatural signs.’ Woods concluded that Pentecostalism was similar to the ancient mystery religions and modern-day Theosophy.

Dr Adams concludes,

“This reassertion of traditional pneumatological teaching seems to have had the intended effect of curbing Pentecostal excess. Certainly, the brief flirtation with Pentecostalism around the Sheffield district through the Saunders family did not result in any lasting movement. The district, in time, saw an increased ‘the close-in-ranks against Pentecostalism’. Even to this day there is no Pentecostal church in Sheffield.

“This staunch Evangelical opposition resulted in Tasmania being the last state in Australia to see the establishment of a formal Pentecostal church, and additionally, ensured that the Sheffield Revival, (the first 'Pentecostal' revival in Tasmania), was conveniently forgotten and remained hidden as part of the spiritual history of Tasmania.”

Laurie Rowston