

Pride of Place
Pitt Street Church 1833-2008
264 Pitt Street, Sydney NSW 2000, Australia

A Brief History by Ben Skerman

Pitt Streets origins lie in the Independent or Dissenting tradition of England, also known as Congregationalism. These were “Brownist” Calvinists of the late 16th Century who differed from John Calvin (and hence Presbyterians) in believing that the individual church or congregation was the basis of church government as exemplified in New Testament practice, rather than the consistory/presbytery - a group of churches in defined geographic area. Both believed in a more or less democratic form of church government with elected deacons/elders, whose actions were checked by church meetings of all members. Such was the strength of their belief that a group of them moved to Leyden in Holland then, in 1620, to North America in a ship called the Mayflower to Plymouth Rock. There they were joined by a further 30,000 English Puritans, mostly Presbyterians and some Quakers, fleeing the “romanising” tendencies of King James I, King Charles I and Archbishop Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury. Many returned to England to join their brethren on the Parliamentarian side during the English Civil War, and a few took part in the Westminster Assembly of Divines, which developed the Westminster Confession of Faith – the basic creed of the Presbyterian Church. (Scottish participation in the war was dependent of England becoming Presbyterian). Oliver Cromwell, the successful leader of the Round head Army which defeated Charles I, and the Lord Protector of England, after the execution of Charles I, was a Congregationalist, as was the poet John Milton.

On the restoration of the Stuart Kings in 1660, laws were passed penalizing “Dissenters” and Catholics, if they did not attend the Church of England, the established church of the realm. A dissenter could not vote, hold government office, be married in a church (the only legal form of marriage), be buried in a church yard (there were no public cemeteries in England until the mid nineteenth century), attend one of the Great Public Schools or University, and were regularly persecuted by the local vicar and villagers. They also had to pay taxes and rates to support the local Church (of England). These penalties were not removed until 1829 and some, the taxes, lasted into the 1880s. As a result the Dissenters tended to be individualists, tradesmen and merchants, including many of the pioneers of the industrial and scientific revolutions... Their education was religious and practical. Dissenting academies gave a much better education than the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

Such was the background of the people the Sydney Independent Chapel established in Pitt Street 1833. There were two groups of founders. One consisted of businessmen such as John Fairfax, owner of the Sydney Morning Herald, David Jones, a haberdasher, and Ambrose Foss a pharmacist. The other, smaller group consisted of retired missionaries from the London Mission

Society (LMS). This was a non-denominational mission set up by the Independents in England, to work in the South Seas. They started in Tahiti at about the same time as first settlement in NSW. One of them, Crooks, with other Missionaries fled Tahiti, when their mentor, King Pomare's political star set temporarily, and sought shelter in Sydney where he set up as a school teacher. In 1811 there were sufficient Congregationalists for Crooks to hold the first Congregationalist Communion Service. This outraged the Colonial Chaplain, Rev Samuel Marsden- the flogging parson and local corresponding secretary of the LMS- who threatened the full force of the law should the offence against established religion be repeated. There were no more communions until 1833.

The Sydney Independent Chapel commenced in Pitt St in premises provided by the Sydney Mechanics School of Arts. After a few years it built its own building at the current site. Its first ministers were supplied by the London Missionary Society, which concerned as much with the unchurched in the colonies as the "wretched heathen" of non-Christian lands. After an initial stumble over personality differences between a young pastor and his wealthy congregation, Pitt St flourished in line with the fortunes of families and businesses of its members. In 1862 it doubled the size of its building to create the existing Pitt St Church building which has changed little since then. It was one of the showplaces of Sydney and dominated the streetscape.

Pitt St is the Mother /Cathedral Church of Congregationalism in NSW. It established new churches throughout the suburbs of Sydney and in rural NSW, often paying for the pastor or building costs. It provided accommodation for the Congregational Union, an incorporated body of all Congregational Churches, when it was founded and for the South Pacific office of the London Missionary Society. It held two services on Sundays, and others on Wednesday plus dawn services and prayer meetings during the week. It ran annual week-long missions in Hyde Park or local theatres, and often paid the costs of individual LMS missionaries in places such as India and China. It had a very large Sunday school which taught literacy and the management of personal finance (penny savings banks) as well religion, and numerous clubs and societies for all ages and interests. Membership was all embracing with little time for anything else. Its Sunday evening services were topical, attracted up to 1000 people, and included guest speakers such as the radical economist Henry George, and politicians such as Sir George Reid.

It was concerned with "the social question". It was left a faith Mission in Sussex Street by its founder. Sussex Street and The Rocks were areas of great poverty and colourful people. The Sussex Street Mission with two paid deaconesses ,provided mission services (and a venue for political meetings), clubs for young mothers, Sunday school education for street urchins and other children, meals for indigent families, a penny savings bank, assistance in addressing alcohol problems, concerts sand magic lantern shows, plus much visiting of homes and factories. The Pitt St Sunday School included Sussex Street children in harbour outings and picnics at Clifton Gardens and Clontarf. Deacons delighted in giving magic lantern shows, and each year a large Christmas party was given and presents of groceries distributed to as many as 150 families. The Mission moved to Surrey Hills in 1917 after the Sussex Street area had been denuded of its population by

the building of wharves along Hickson Street. It was closed in the 1930s. By that time Pitt St was more concerned with social order and discipline than social welfare, much of which was now provided by the State.

Pitt Street regularly gave donations to worthy causes. Donations were given to flood victims and drought victims. In 1889 a donation was sent in support of the strikers in the Great London Dockers Strike for “a tanner a week”. During the great depression of the 1890s the church was paying the full living costs of a number of indigent women in Newtown and the minister had a fund to give one off assistance. There was also a Labour Bureau to assist the unemployed young men of the church. However the congregation was split over the practical issues of local unionism and political solutions to widespread and chronic unemployment. The London docks were a long way away. Violent demonstrations against squatters with armed escorts taking blacked wool down Pitt St to Darling Harbour for shipment were closer to home. A Youngmen’s Bible Class studying “the social problem in the light of the gospel” was closed down as socialistic and the minister resigned. However a Deacon survived an attempt to remove him for preaching socialistic sermons at public meetings in the Domain on a Sunday in violation of the fourth commandment.

Pitt St prided itself on being intellectually liberal. Its ministers were well educated and a number held doctorates. Their sermons were published regularly in both The Daily Telegraph and Sydney Morning Herald. It tried to recruit, usually unsuccessfully, prominent popular preachers from England. Ministers were well paid. Dr Jefferis (1878-1889) received a stipend of 1000 pounds a year when the annual income of a tradesman was less than 100 pounds. The Church had regular guest speakers or discussion group on topics ranging from Wordsworth to Old Age pensions, and land distribution as the basis of wealth. Its Literary Society held a conversazione at which the Roentgen Tube (X-ray) was demonstrated two year after its invention in Germany. Issues such as evolution or higher criticism did not worry it (one of its ministers claimed), it could take them or leave them. A number of its members held posts at the University of Sydney. It campaigned on contemporary social issues- slum clearance, federation, liquor laws, fair land distribution and keeping Catholic clergy out of politics. It was politically influential and usually had at least one MLC or MLA in its membership. This enabled it to have a hansom cab stand relocated and the tram timetable altered when both interfered with morning worship. This influence declined throughout the twentieth century but never died out completely.

Initially the members of Pitt St lived close to the Church. Macquarie Street was full of the town houses of the rich, York and Bathurst Streets of terrace houses and Sussex Street of tenements. From the 1880s Sydney changed from being residential to being the centre of commerce and industry and members were scattered though out the emerging suburbs, from Bellevue Hill, to Randwick, Kogarah, Lewisham, North Sydney and Manly. It became a city church and ever since has had to address the problems of what the mission of such a church is, how to provide pastoral care to a scattered membership, and how to preserve a feeling of fellowship amongst members. It tried to recruit Ministers who were inspiring preachers and would attract an audience. In addition to its work in Sussex Street and Surrey hills it influence the city through its relationships with other

protestant churches, especially joint prayer meetings and services, and weekly social events for service men and women during World War I and II (in World War II it was known as The American Church), and use of the media. In 1900 the church and its minister both had the telephone installed. From 1924 evening services were broadcast by commercial radio. In the 1960s it established a coffee shop drop in centre for youth. It was unsuccessful.

Pastoral Care has always been difficult and has oscillated between being the responsibility of members of the Congregation or the sole responsibility of the Minister. This was particularly difficult during time of crises such as the outbreak of Plague around the wharves in 1900, and the Influenza Pandemic of 1919 when Sydney was shut down and 10,000 Australians died. In Wartime one minute silences for members of the congregation who had been killed were common and one of the responsibilities of all clergymen in Australia was the delivery of telegrams from the Dept of Defence to the families of service men and women who had been killed or were missing in action.

An additional problem has been intermittent but severe financial crises brought about by fluctuating membership and the vicissitudes of having large historic building in constant need of repair and at risk from white ants. All temptations, and on occasion concerted attempts by Ministers or Sydney Council, to move the church to where people lived have been resisted. Pitt St has always seen its place as being in the City.

Pitt Street was always patriotic. It supported the Empire and Commonwealth. For the death of Queen Victoria it was dressed in black and purple and the congregation came dressed in mourning. On other occasions such as the end of World War I or II it was draped in Union Jacks and Australian Flags. It campaigned for Federation and the inclusion of God in the Australian Constitution, and supported the Boer War (as preventing the re-enslavement of the black people by the Boers), World War I and II. Like most protestant churches it was virulently anti Catholic and suspicious of Anglicans. It supported White Australia on the ground of protecting an ethical society from contamination of baser ethical standards. In the 1930s it was deeply suspicious of communism influence in trade unions and among the unemployed an sympathetic to right wing and conservative views.

For much of its life it had a paid organist, paid choir conductor and one or two paid musicians. From time to time the choir had to be reminded that it was there to aid worship and not to give Sunday musical recitals. Its organist for more than 50 years, employed in 1895, was Lillian Frost, one of the leading musicians of Sydney. The choir was one of the major musical establishments in the city. Concerts and recitals of Judas Maccabeus and Stabat Mater brought in a considerable income. The organist was allowed to take private students and perform concerts to augment her income.

One of the Church's principal roles was as the mother, the "Cathedral" Church of the Congregational Union. It hosted the Annual General Assemblies of the NSW Congregational Union, and from time to time the Australian Congregational Union. Many of its Ministers were elected Presidents of both. Up until 1908 it was a very arrogant mother church but financial problems

humbled it. It was assisted by its daughter churches and became a “team player”. Initially it was not an enthusiast for Church Union, believing in spiritual rather than corporeal union, but joint work with Baptists, Methodists and Presbyterian in Military Chaplaincy, and war time changed that attitude. In 1927 it demolished its old three-story Sunday Scholl Hall and built Pilgrim House, in part as the headquarters of the Congregational Union.

Like all other churches it’s role became more problematic after World War II as the attitudes and makeup of the population changed. Attempts to reverse declining membership with charismatic preachers and youth drop in centers were unavailing. With pending Church Union and increasing cost the building appeared to be redundant and plans were made to sell the site and have a chapel in the high- rise office block which would replace it. A small group of members opposed this and in alliance with Jack Mundy of the Builders Labourers Federation , green bans saved the building.

However the congregation had to be built up again from scratch. How this was done, how it was finance, struggles against the racism of the National Front, assistance to boat people and refugees, and its battle for inclusiveness within the Uniting Church for gay lesbian and bisexual people, are another story.
