

German Baptist Churches of South-East Queensland and Revival



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Revival in Australia

Has there ever been revival in Australia? This is a tricky question about which opinions differ widely. If there was no full scale revival, then were there localised revivals? American revivalist and prolific writer on the subject, J Edwin Orr certainly thought so, and gave anecdotal evidence for many examples in the South Seas generally including Australia.¹

The period of the Billy Graham crusades across Australia in 1959 is often regarded as the best example of at least something near to revival.² But the noted revival scholar Stuart Piggin is in no doubt - it was a 'revival and a great one', he affirmed with complete certainty.³ There have also been claims of revival amongst Aboriginal communities⁴ and in Pentecostal history.

The answer to our question depends a great deal on the definition we use. After some detailed analysis, Piggin ends up focusing on the three obvious factors as the key components - 'revitalisation of the Church, the conversion of large numbers of unbelievers, and the diminution of sinful practices in the community'.⁵

On this basis he lists 69 places where revival took place in Australia between 1834 and 1905⁶ but there is no documentation provided for these events. The list includes only 4 in Queensland - at Warwick 1873, Toowoomba 1877, Marburg 1881, and amongst the Kanakas in 1905 and 1906. Although Billy Graham was not the first, or the last, revivalist to visit this country, it seems that there has been nothing (excepting 1959) touching great sections of the nation in the way that many would expect from the celebrated revivals in other times and places, such as Wales, East Africa, Europe and the 'awakenings' in USA. This is the mythology of revival in Australia.

There is little mention of Baptist churches experiencing revival in the samples given (the most common denomination seems to be Methodist). However, there are plenty of references in Queensland Baptist publications to revival, but usually it is a matter of looking back longingly to historic examples in other countries, and expressing earnest hope and fervent prayer for a repeat in the future (although this hope cuts out around 1990!). Nevertheless, there are often reports of occasions when there were numerous converts from particular evangelistic efforts. Piggin observed that given their theology and traditions,

¹ J. Edwin Orr, *Evangelical Awakenings in the South Seas* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1976), chapters 8, 15, 21.

² S. B. Babbage and I. Siggins, *Light beneath the Cross* (Kingswood: The World's Work; 1960), 180f.

³ Stuart Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World: Evangelical Christianity in Australia* (Brunswick East, Acorn Press, 2012; previous versions, 1996, 2004 under different titles), 171.

⁴ Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World*, 197-199

⁵ Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World*, 156.

⁶ Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World*, 40, 61.

Baptists more than any other denomination should have been able to benefit from the Billy Graham crusades; the percentage of Baptist decisions was five times higher than expected.⁷

German Baptists of South-East Queensland

This leads us to consider the German Baptists of south east Queensland and the possibility of revival in that community.⁸ There is a well known photograph taken in 1905 of a group of no fewer than 52 candidates for baptism, all dressed in white, lined up outside the Kalbar (earlier known as Engelsburg) church; they were the fruit of a local evangelistic crusade. The question arises: Was this the kind of occurrence that was in mind in the references to ‘revival’ which are scattered throughout the literature of the German Baptists? There are other reports in the records of other German Baptist churches, of sizeable numbers of baptisms such as 50 at Tarampa in 1881.

There is a report of the very first appearance of German Baptists in Queensland in the 1860s, which said they caused a stir within the small German community in Brisbane: ‘Lutheran ministers were induced to hold prayer meetings themselves, and there was a regular reformation of habits, if not a thorough revival among Germans.’⁹ There were many conversions as a result.

It is interesting that the German Baptists grew from this initial group and organised themselves as an association several years before their English counterparts. At its peak, their largest church was much stronger than any of the English ones, apart from the founding Wharf Street church which was numerically anomalous.

The emergence of German Baptist churches in south east Queensland was a development unique in Australia, arising out of an influx of German immigrants from the 1860s who were either Baptists before leaving their fatherland, or were converted after their arrival in the colony. They formed a series of churches in the rural West Moreton district, west and north of Ipswich, several of which have persisted to the present and whose members and their descendants have made a highly significant contribution to Baptist life in Queensland.

Although not numerically large in absolute terms (especially compared with similar movements in North America), German migration to Queensland, mostly for economic reasons, was relatively large in local terms. In 1871, when the immigration rate was high, they comprised almost 8% of the population, and around 1890, they reached their maximum pre-war number, about 15,000 (although the percentage was falling by then). The proportion of Germans in the population in areas where Baptists flourished was

⁷ Piggin, *Spirit, Word and World*, 166.

⁸ Ken R. Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to ‘Eternity’: A History of Australian Baptists* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 170-176; *Queensland Baptist Jubilee Record Volume 1855-1905* (Brisbane: W.R. Smith and Co., n.d.), 108-114; David Parker (ed.), *Pressing on with the Gospel: The Story of Baptists in Queensland 1855-2005* (Brisbane: Baptist Historical Society of Queensland, 2005), 17-20.

⁹ *The Queensland Freeman (QF)*, June 1881, 83. In 1868 Pastor C. F. A. Schirmeister was pastor of St Andreas on Wickham Terrace, North Brisbane and Pastor G. Hampe was minister at a church in Cordelia Street, South Brisbane (information in email from Robin Kleinschmidt, 1 May 2015)

often very high – sometimes virtually 100%. Prior to World War I, Germans were the largest group of non-British, non-Irish immigrants and Queensland had the highest number in Australia.

When the English speaking Baptist Association was formed in 1877, it consisted of 8 churches with 618 members, but by then the Germans numbered 6 churches with 320 members. Even at the time of the jubilee of English Baptist work in 1905, the German Baptist church membership was 471 while the English churches only totalled 2040.¹⁰

German Baptists in City and Country

The very first Christian witness by Germans in Queensland took place from 1838 when a group of families from the Gossner Mission were engaged by the visionary Presbyterian minister, Dr John Dunmore Lang, to evangelise indigenous people near Brisbane; their adherence to the Lutheran faith was mostly recognized as being loose. The mission itself was not a success and with its break-up, most of the personnel gradually integrated with other churches, including the Baptists.

Legislation passed by the government of Queensland (which only became a separate colony in 1859) which was designed to expand the population and economy by attracting new settlers to farming regions resulted large numbers of Germans arriving in the 1860s. Initially, they mostly lived in the Brisbane area, especially close to where the Gossner Mission had existed. Some of these began worshipping with the pioneer Wharf Street Baptist church, whose energetic pastor, Rev B. G. Wilson, welcomed them and actively evangelised amongst them.

However, the German group soon developed its own identity and separated from Wharf Street because of differences over the doctrine and practice of communion. It was this group whose vigorous witness to believer's baptism and their gospel preaching caused the reaction with the fledgling Lutheran community mentioned above.

As the new colonial government made land available under attractive terms for farming in the areas west of Ipswich, many of these Brisbane based Germans moved to this district. It is here that the German Baptist churches were set up, with the first ones appearing in the late 1860s at Vernor on the Brisbane River, at Mt Walker and on the Bremer River. The areas of land which the Germans occupied were usually covered in extremely dense virgin scrub in remote locations and often in hilly and inaccessible areas. This meant that the conditions of farming and life generally were extremely harsh, but the new immigrants worked hard, and in time made a success of their new-found life.

Other Christians in these areas were mainly Lutheran, but also Roman Catholic, and after 1883 the Apostolic Church of Queensland, and then the Churches of Christ (often proselytised from the Baptists). As the German Baptists moved into a second generation, some of the younger families moved to other more distant areas, including the South Burnett, but they did not form German speaking churches there.

¹⁰ *Queensland Baptist Jubilee Record Volume 1855-1905*, 133.

Characteristics of Revival I – Church Growth

Now we may turn to the question of revival and the German Baptist Churches, considering first the most obvious characteristic - extraordinary growth. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence of rapid growth amongst these churches to be found in their published histories, newspaper reports and conference documents, although firm statistics are not plentiful, and nor is it possible to make precise comparisons with other churches.

The most common of these references are reports of large numbers of conversions and baptisms (such as that mentioned above – the 1905 photograph at Kalbar which was the result of local evangelists. The record for a single baptismal service for that church was 82 baptisms in 1910.

For example, H. Moller reported to J. G. Oncken in a letter dated 6 July 1871¹¹ that at Normanby Reserve, ‘About 4 years ago our congregation consisted of 5 members, while now the number amongst to 60, not counting those outside’ (possibly a reference to adherents or those living in other places). He mentioned a gathering where 25 were converted at which ‘the love of God surged through many poor sinners’ hearts, which caused us to recall the Pentecost of Jerusalem.’

Overall, the efforts by the Germans to establish churches, with modest but adequate buildings and many other activities, quite early after the establishment of the farms and communities indicates that they quickly garnered enough strength for this organisational development. As soon as they could these original buildings were replaced by larger and much more elaborate ones – in fact, the church at Kalbar became the largest building in the entire district. Over nearly 30 years, they continued to establish churches and outstations in each new district that opened up to farming. Some of these churches grew to a considerable size, even when compared with the English churches in the urban areas.

The case at Zillman’s Waterholes may have been special, but perhaps it was not all that unusual – this near Brisbane church was depleted by a sudden exodus of many members to the West Moreton area in 1869. However, there were so many new converts immediately afterwards that within only two years they found it necessary to build a church to house the number attending services for which they thought home group meetings might have been sufficient.

Furthermore, they established a conference or association of German churches almost as quickly as the churches were formed. The first effort was in 1869 which covered both the West Moreton churches and one back in Brisbane. Then they worked in conjunction with the English speaking Baptist church in Ipswich under its insightful pastor, Thomas Gerrard, to form a ‘General Baptist Association’ in 1870 to provide a system of ordination of pastors in the interests of good church order. This took place some seven years before the English Baptists formed their Association, even though the English churches preceded the German ones by more than a decade!

¹¹ Letter in collection of Baptist Church Archives, Queensland.

Although some of the growth that led to the establishment of these churches was based on Baptists who migrated from Germany, one report said that at Tarampa only 30 were Baptists on arrival but by 1877, the membership was 300.¹²

Many of the converts were young people who needed careful nurture, made more difficult because they were generally poorly educated; Sunday Schools and youth groups formed to offset this problem were reported as being not very successful.¹³ Similarly, the churches lacked good pastoral care as it was not until 1878 that a full time ordained minister was available to serve them in the person of Rev. Hermann Windolf, an experienced pastor from Germany who had trained at Hamburg and was in close contact with J. G. Oncken. Previously they had to rely on lay leaders. However, gifted as some of them were, they were untrained theologically or in terms of managing church affairs; they still had to work their farms as well as lead the churches, and as one report said dismally, these men ‘did their best, and that was in most cases very little’ so it was no wonder that ‘the steam ran down’!¹⁴

Growth came from regular services and the pastoral interest of leaders and members and families; they were reported to be ‘indefatigable as bush missionaries’¹⁵ There were often itinerant evangelists, frequently English speaking, who visited the churches over the entire period under review producing a steady flow of converts; there were ‘waves of revival’ during a visit by one to Marburg in 1884.¹⁶

Some of the growth may have come from some inter-marriages with other denominations, but this practice was generally not encouraged from either side. What did cause some growth was the state of the Lutheran churches in the area at the time – they were poorly organised, fractious, did not have enough pastors and often did not adhere strongly to their own confessional basis.¹⁷ It is revealing that in the Logan District to the south east, where the Lutheran cause was much tighter confessionally and better organised, Baptists made no inroads at all.¹⁸

Characteristics of Revival II – Intense Spirituality

Visitors from the English Baptists often remarked on the intensity of spiritual life at German Baptist conventions and church services and the ‘festive’ nature of the gatherings (plus the consumption of large

¹² Richard Scanlan & David Parker, *Tarampa Baptist Church* (Brisbane: Baptist Historical Society of Queensland, 2000), 7.

¹³ *The Queensland Baptist (QB)*, December 1881, 178.

¹⁴ ‘German Baptists in Queensland’, *Queensland Freeman*, June 1881, 83)

¹⁵ *Queensland Times*, 15 April 1871.

¹⁶ Richard Scanlan & David Parker, *Marburg Baptist Church* (Brisbane: Baptist Historical Society of Queensland, 2000), 7.

¹⁷ F. Otto Theile, *One Hundred Years of the Lutheran Church in Queensland* (Brisbane: United Evangelical Lutheran Church in Australia, 1938) 15-16, (accessed on-line <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-30585562> 24 February 2015). They also lost members to the Apostolic Church in later years).

¹⁸ I am indebted to Robin Kleinschmidt for this insight, 16 February 2015.

amounts of food!).¹⁹ This evaluation was also backed up by reports by the German Baptists themselves to the Baptist newspaper back home. In fact, the regular pattern for their Conference sessions was business and fellowship during the day, usually with serious discussion papers on church life, an inspirational service in afternoon and evening followed by a long night of ‘revival’ usually extending to the early hours of the next morning.²⁰ There were similar kinds of gatherings at Easter and Whitsunday as well.

At least one report of a typical meeting strongly suggests something very close to revival, when it said: ‘Their services commenced at 11 a.m. on the 25th [Dec], and continued until half-past 8 the following morning, during which time a good many cried for mercy and several found peace.’²¹

So these gatherings were highly important to the participants and they were usually well attended, even though travel was likely to be extremely difficult.

Their first duty upon taking up their land was to clear the thick bush, build a simple home and get their farm established. Although these were daunting and physically exhausting tasks, they were also quick to establish worship services. Home devotions were vital as well. All this indicated that they placed high value on worship and fellowship as necessities for their spiritual life, which would have produced an intensity of fervour. They often had brass bands and choirs to support their worship and Sankey’s song books were not unknown, although with German words.²² The occasional visits of itinerant preachers such as evangelists, ministers and missionaries of the English Baptist Union were usually welcomed as further ways of fostering devotion.

Furthermore (unlike Lutherans), they did not have to wait for ordained ministers to arrive but appointed local leaders. However, when Windolf arrived he soon found some ‘sore places’ due to the lack of training and experience of these lay pastors, not to mention the ‘drawbacks and malpractices’, even ‘controversial elements [who were prone to] fight each other’ resulting in ‘a paralysing influence’.²³ Despite the ‘prolonged spiritual dryness’, Windolf was soon able to report that ‘the Lord in his grace has now blessed us in abundance’ with a ‘blessed time of revival and progress.’²⁴

The harsh conditions of daily life and their relative isolation and remoteness reinforced also by the fact that they were migrants in a strange land with their own culture must have given added value and intensity to their Christian fellowship. Factors of this kind no doubt contributed to their characteristic strictness of their church rules and administration of discipline (which often resulted in humble

¹⁹ *QB*, 11 May 1902, 66.

²⁰ Brian Kickbush, *Minden Baptist Church Centenary, 1882-1982* (Minden: Minden Baptist Church, n.d.) 3; *Queensland Times*, 2 June 1885)

²¹ *Queensland Times*, 31 December 1874, referring to Vernor.

²² William Higlett, ‘Sketches of Bush Work in Queensland’, *Sword and Trowel*, 1886, 538-541.

²³ Hermann Windolf reporting in *Der Wahrheitszeuge* May 1879 (collected reports from this journal prepared by Glenn Roberts; see *Baptist Historical Society of Queensland Newsletter*, No 3, July 1985, ‘Recent Acquisitions for the Baptist Archives’, 3.)

²⁴ Hermann Windolf reporting in *Der Wahrheitszeuge*, September 1881.

confessions and restorations), and the fact that there were often disagreements amongst people of such strong minds and wills.

Further evidences of their piety included regular prayer meetings and special periods of intense prayer; one church reported five consecutive nights of prayer for overseas missions.²⁵ It also included their support of evangelistic work locally and further afield, as well as church planting nearby and elsewhere.

They also had a keen interest in foreign missions, noted by Donald W. Dayton as a sure sign of revival.²⁶ Despite not being affluent at all, the Conference appointed a treasurer for missions²⁷ so they could support financially as well as in prayer the fledging Queensland Baptist Mission in Bengal and the Russian mission.²⁸ They regularly welcomed visiting missionaries to their meetings. There was even a Women's Missionary Society.²⁹ It was not surprising therefore that two of their women went overseas in missionary service – one to the German mission in the Cameroon and another to a Queensland-based mission in India.

Even if the examples of intense spirituality amongst the German Baptists were not constant or widespread, there were enough to show that revival was in the air. Rev. Samuel Blum, who came to Queensland from USA in 1900 certainly sensed it, and summed up the situation aptly:

We believe that there is a great deal of genuine piety in the hearts of German Baptists. They hold a sharp separation from the world. The candidates for baptism are examined very carefully, and church discipline is frequent. In missionary enterprises they are up to date, but in doctrine they are as old-fashioned as the first church in Jerusalem. In contribution they are liberal, and firmly believe on the expansion of the Lord's Kingdom, even if their views of political expansion are narrow. It will take some time before they accept views of some doctrines, which are common in our English Baptist churches. We must take the German as he is.³⁰

These signs of revival could be attributed in measure to local factors. However some of the people had come from the Templin church in Germany where there had been revival in the few years prior to their departure with hundreds of conversions and baptisms.³¹ There may also have been some lingering effects from the movement of German pietism, including occurrences of 'enthusiasm' (*Schwaermerei*) which sometimes appeared amongst the Lutherans. However, there is apparently no record of the initial Gossner missionaries who were often regarded as Moravian in orientation making any contribution of this kind.

²⁵ *Minden Baptist Church Centenary*, 14.

²⁶ Donald W. Dayton, 'Revivalism' in J. D. Douglas (ed.), *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978).

²⁷ *Minden Baptist Church Centenary*, 4.

²⁸ *Minden Baptist Church Centenary*, 10.

²⁹ *Queensland Times*, 16 May, 1907.

³⁰ *QB*, August 1901, 108

³¹ Laurie Wolter, *From the Fatherland to the Fassifern Scrub: Celebrating the 125th anniversary of the Kalbar Baptist Church 1875-2000* (Kalbar: Kalbar Baptist Church, 2000).

Characteristics of Revival III – Community Impact

If the conversions and piety characteristic of the German Baptists point to the existence of revival in their midst, then there is some difficulty in the case of the third distinguishing feature, beneficial impact on the community, both in terms of the German Baptist community itself and the people around them.

Unfortunately there do not appear to be any reports like those from elsewhere to suggest that ‘the hotels are empty and the churches are full’.³² But it is clear that the churches did manage to hold together and grow for many years; some can report several generations of membership. Mostly the churches were well regarded by their community, and from time to time experienced good will in the form of practical assistance and support at difficult times.

However, there were often tensions within the Baptist Germans, just as there were amongst their Lutheran counterparts, although perhaps not so chronic. The first Lutheran congregation was formed in 1858, but it took them until 1885 to establish functioning denominational organisations, and until 1921 for full denominational unity, whereas the Baptists had an organisation by 1869 (albeit with many fluctuations in its effectiveness).

Admittedly, the first church at Vernor could not be built in 1870 when initially planned because of a disagreement (and it had to change its site as well).³³ Also, the conference of German Baptists had many incarnations before it matured into an effective entity around 1900 under the leadership especially of the pastor-missionaries who came from USA. The first ordained minister, Hermann Windolf did not enjoy harmonious relationships with his initial congregation (probably due largely to the transition from lay to ordained leadership and a different concept of church membership³⁴). Upon his transfer to a second church (Marburg), there was an expulsion of 29 members, although many were restored later). As Samuel Blum conceded, ‘When we are face to face with a German, we are dealing with obstinate customers.’³⁵

There were usually good, albeit spasmodic, relationships with the English Baptist Union prior to the 1920s, and some of the German churches were in membership. However, there was some movement in and out, in one case (Kalbar) over open membership issues. Good relations were maintained with church leaders in Germany and links were established with the German Baptists in USA.

³² See *Der Wahrheitszeuge*, October 1883 – a report about a revival of this kind in a town called Edenthal; this town cannot be identified positively, but it may be a district of that name located near Kingaroy in south east Queensland where there was a large Lutheran population; if so then there is a such a report related to German Baptists in the area.

³³ *The Brisbane Courier*, 10 September 1873.

³⁴ Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to ‘Eternity’*, 174.

³⁵ *QB*, August 1901, 108

However, perhaps the most notorious case of tension within the German Baptist community occurred at Marburg where on one occasion there were rival pastors conducting different services simultaneously in the same building! This resulted in physical violence which came to the attention of the police and the law courts. Eventually, there were two Baptist churches in the same small town, which for a time refused efforts at mediation. Eventually reconciliation took place and the church continued to witness faithfully for a couple more generations.³⁶

So the record of beneficial impact on the community and the reputation of the German Baptists for unity among themselves was not so good. Not surprisingly, times of 'peace' were worth noting, and were sometimes followed by remarkable growth! The Bremer River fellowship rejoiced in an 1871 letter to Oncken that 'we presently have peace and harmony in our midst and enjoy precious hours in our edification sessions.' Windolf likewise rejoiced in 1883 when there was formal reconciliation between three churches with the hope of 'precious fruit ... and prosperity.'³⁷

The Heritage of Revival

By 1920s, the days of strong growth were over and so were the days of revival - at least in some minds. The Kalbar historian said that after this date 'there is very little spectacular to report - no mass conversions or baptisms as in the early years, not strong revival movement.'³⁸

This was a reference to the kind of event recalled by one old timer who said:

I remember revivals there that would have rejoiced the heart of any Salvationist- something like the Welsh revival of some years ago in miniature. That was in the early seventies, when German Baptists were meeting in a slab place.³⁹

By this time the German Baptists were losing their identity as a separate community. There were several factors at work, especially the cessation of immigration, which would not resume again until after World War II; but by then the old situation was well past.

Then there was the impact of World War I on Germans in Australia, which, inter alia, hastened the switch in the German churches to the use of the English language.⁴⁰ This signalled the integration of second and later generations more or less completely into the wider society. This was coupled with better communications and other infrastructure which meant that the German communities were now far less isolated than they had been 60 years before.

³⁶ *Queensland Times*, 20 January 1887; *The Brisbane Courier*, 3 February, 1887; *The Queenslander*, 29 January, 1887)

³⁷ Hermann Windolf reporting in *Der Wahrheitszeuge*, January 1883.

³⁸ *Kalbar Baptist Church, 1875-1975*, 10.

³⁹ *The Brisbane Courier*, 13 May 1922.

⁴⁰ Another striking impact was the forced changed of names of the German towns (and the Baptist churches) to English names, sometimes with polemic overtones - Engelsburg to Kalbar: Marburg to Townshend; Minden to Frenchton.

Another highly significant factor affecting the German churches was the change in rural economy on which they were largely based, resulting in many families moving out of the districts thus weakening the churches. Families also were much smaller.

By this time the churches were appointing Australian pastors (although some of them had German backgrounds) and they all became members of the Baptist Union of Queensland. The German Baptist Conference was rendered inactive and finally faded out of view around 1930. Over the 80 years since then, a few of the German churches have ceased to function, while the rest have continued to witness and serve, although sometimes finding it difficult to sustain themselves.

Nevertheless, in their 50 year history as a separate group, they performed an important role of evangelising and caring for their own people; as Samuel Blum wisely pointed out:

German Baptist churches must be looked at as a very important factor in evangelising the people of Australia. If German Baptist churches are failures for the training of Christian characters, then the Baptist denomination as a whole is a failure. The time may come when German churches are no more wanted, but for the present we must have them. . . . We believe that the German churches are organs for the slow assimilation of the Germans, and we ought to help them in their work.⁴¹

Their history of a strong and virile faith characterised by periods of remarkable growth and intense spiritual experiences is a heritage which cannot be taken from them. It ought to be remembered as a vital part of our story, even if it cannot be described as revival in the fullest sense of that term.

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⁴¹ *QB*, August 1901, 109.