

## Baptist churches and ministers in Queensland – trends over the last 20 years

By Rev Dr David Parker, MA, BD, PhD ©

March 2022

The 20-year period from 2002 to 2022 was quite distinctive for the Baptist Union of Queensland – a relatively stable time in terms of its activities and leadership, and one that was both introduced and terminated by major reviews and subsequent extensive organisational changes. So this provides a neat period in which to review the trends in the numbers of churches and recognized ministers.

According to information given in the annual Baptist Union Handbook (or, Directory, reverting to its original title since 2011), the overall number of churches grew from 168 to 219 and the total number of ministers from 336 to 445.

Year	2002	2007	2012	2017	2022
Total	336	372	393	430	445
Retired	67	75	83	115	129
Non-local	27	19	12	10	12
Past Ass	2	8	2		
Student	56	55	17		
Prov & Sup	2	10	28	12	34
Min Ord	128	161	70	2	
Min Unord	54	44	25		
Reg Min			59	145	117
Reg Min Ord			97	146	153
Min	172	205	95	2	
Reg Min			156	291	270
Total Reg and Ord Mins	172	205	251	293	270

**Figure 1. Data about Ministers recognized by the Baptist Union of Queensland 2002-2022 taken from the annual Directories of the Baptist Union of Queensland**

Perhaps the most distinctive figure of all is the number of retired ministers, which doubled from 67 to 129, or about 20% to nearly 29%. The surge began in 2008 when the system for recognizing ministers (see below) was changed significantly. An earlier surge took place in the early 1980s. Interesting questions are raised by these figures - are retired ministers now living much longer than earlier on? Are they retiring earlier and so creating a larger pool? (if so, why – health, or disillusioned or lost their call, or overwhelmed by the rapidly increasing bureaucracy? Are they coming from other states to retire in Queensland?) In late February 2022 the Baptist Union put out feelers about ways of engaging with this large bloc of retired ministers, the first such move since the cessation of the Retired Ministers' and Wives' Fellowship which had operated successfully until about 15 years earlier.

The data (see Figure 1) was calculated in February 2022 and took samplings at 5-year intervals.

These are now the only data made available publicly. Statistics on membership, baptism, finances, property and other matters which have been collected from the churches by the Baptist Union annually since 1877 have not been published since 2008. The only indication of the timing of the data printed in the current Handbooks is the cover date but that is clearly not the date of data. Even when the more detailed information was published, there was no indication that the dates of the collection of the two sets of data were the same, and typically the numbers of churches in the two lists did not match, which makes full analysis difficult.

Another important consideration in this exercise is to note that, over recent years, the annual publication of the Baptist Union has changed. Originally, it was an authentic Yearbook with detailed information about the structure and relationships of the churches and other Baptist organisations. It is now simply an alphabetical directory of people, churches and organisations related to the Baptist Union, and in general, little detail is given about the status and links of the entries.

The information in the section labelled 'Ministers & Pastors' includes not only the ministerial status of the person, and their contact details, but since 1963, has also contained more detailed information about their qualifications and training, and previous and current ministry positions. However, this information is not always complete or even presented, and full names of the entrants are not used, meaning that accuracy and usefulness of the data is often severely limited. This is a seriously regrettable situation because this list seems to be only official record of recognized ministers of the denomination.

### **Churches**

The data for churches is simpler than that for ministers, and so makes a good starting point. Typically, each entry provides the name and address of the church, service times, contact details and the names and positions of pastoral and administrative staff.

Up to 2012, church names were listed without any categorisation as to type, although sometimes the term 'fellowship' was used. This word used to be the official designation for a fledgling church which was still not strong or stable enough to be considered a fully functioning church entitled to membership in the Baptist Union of Queensland in its own right. A 'fellowship' would have been planted by a nearby church as an outstation of some kind, or it might have been planted directly by the Baptist Union. People supporting a fellowship would hold their membership (if any) in the mother church.

Furthermore, even by 2002, the old convention of naming a church simply by its location (such as 'Allensville Baptist Church') had already been changing and the term 'Fellowship' was one that was sometimes used instead of 'church'. The 2002 Handbook contains names of both official fellowships and of churches which use that word in their title without any distinction, so it is impossible to determine the exact status of a church including the word 'fellowship' in its name, of which there were 20 in the 2002 listing. (The statistics for that year show 15 fellowships!)

By the time of the 2017 Handbook, a new system was in operation, and the churches were designated according to 3 categories – Constituted, Phase 1 and Phase 2. The latter two, more or less equivalent to the former 'fellowship', were stages in the growth of new church plant towards full independence – the initial beginning stage for Phase 1, and a much more mature level for Phase 2 – in fact, almost ready to be recognized as a church and a member of the Baptist Union. In that year, there were 157 churches, 34 at Phase 1 and 9 at Phase 2.

By the end of the next 5-year period, yet another different system was in use. There were now 159 churches, and 37 'associate' churches (roughly, a combination of the former Phase 1 and Phase 2 categories). There was also another new category of 'simple' church (8 in number). These were defined in the Baptist Union Constitution as 'groups of a Baptist nature that lack the resources to become a Member Church' but could benefit from some Baptist Union services by being recognized as such; they were categorically not members of the Baptist Union. So they are not included in this discussion. In addition, there were an additional 8 churches listed without any designation, but these were thought to be associate churches.

These figures show that the growth in fully-constituted churches over 20 years was only modest (136 to 159). In the last 5-year period, the numbers of churches and church plants were more or less static – 157 to 159 and 43 to 45. This suggests that there was a considerable problem in bringing church plants through to full maturity, and that in reality church growth was nil.

Membership figures were published in 2002 standing at 12,416 (as at 30 June 2001), and only 10,827 in 2007 (as at 30 June 2006 – but it is to be noted that 25% of churches did not submit returns, so this figure is more or less useless).

### **Ministers**

The publicised data for ministers officially recognized by the Baptist Union is complicated due to many categories of minister and several changes in the classification scheme (See Figure 2).

The gross figure (as stated above, 336 in 2002 and 445 in 2022) is an increase of 32%. The figures reported to the annual Baptist Assembly (although not every year and not able to be reconciled with the Directory data) show a similar increase – from 344 to 452, or 31%. The total number is probably larger because it is known that some retired ministers have not maintained their accreditation and so do not show up on the official lists.

However, this gross figure needs to be analysed in more detail to obtain a better picture of the situation, and to see how many fully qualified ministers actively serving in local church have been officially recognised.

Over the years there have been different categories of recognized ministers. As well as 'retired', there have been ordained, non-ordained, students at various stages of study and recognition, those serving outside the local churches such as missionaries (whether with Baptist missionary organisations or others) and those in other non-denominational ministry positions. Strangely, recognized ministers serving in a Baptist Union of Queensland denominational position have never been categorised separately (currently there could be more than 20 in this grouping, including part-time positions).

So to get a clearer picture of the numbers of active fully recognized ministers, we can first separate out those who are retired (67 in 2002 and 129 in 2022) leaving 269 and 316. Then we can remove those who are classed as 'missionary' and in 'special service', 27 in 2002 and 12 in 2012 (not listed in 2022), a considerable drop on historic figures suggesting a far more parochial attitude existed. In 2012 there were 2 designated 'provisional' recognition, but this jumped to 28 in 2022. There were 56 students in 2002 but this category did not appear in 2022.

Traditionally, those who are fully recognized ministers would have had the status of 'ordination' but since 2007, ordination has been an optional extra (requiring further study and experience, bringing with it the courtesy title, 'Reverend', and attracting a higher level of recommended remuneration).

Thus the current listings include registered ministers ordained, 153, and registered ministers unordained, 117. (It was after this change that the surge in the number of retired ministers occurred.)

Before the advent of 'Registration', there was a capacity for non-ordained and largely un-trained men to serve as fully recognized ministers, but these were typically in a special category, usually older men or men who had a significant period of full-time ministry behind them (perhaps as an evangelist or missionary) for whom the full rigours of the ordination training course were not considered appropriate. Some instances of all these various categories appear in the published lists currently. So in 2002 there were 128 ordained ministers, and 54 un-ordained.

So overall, the number of normal fully qualified recognized ministers (excluding unqualified, retired, and various special categories) changed from 128 + 54 + 2 (184) to 153 + 117, (270), an increase of 46%, which is well over the increase in the total number of churches (168 to 219). This probably reflects the strong trend during the period to staff-run churches and the decline in volunteer ministry (and general involvement in church affairs) exercised by church members, a development which is surely to be classed as a 'mixed blessing.'

Some Assembly reports for these years contained statistics for the numbers and categories of ministers, usually dated to June 30 of the previous year, but these figures are difficult to reconcile with the data published in the Directory. However, there is one more category of interest revealed in the reports of 2020 and 2021 which does not appear in the Directory, viz, Defence Force Chaplains, 10 in number each of those years.

### **Women in ministry**

The other category of interest is female pastors. Contrary to the situation in other states and overseas, women in Queensland are not permitted to be ordained. In 2002 (and earlier), women who were in ministry and seeking accreditation were placed into a category known as 'pastoral assistant', of which there were 2, although in 2007 there were 8 but in 2012 the number reverted back to 2. In the 1960s there had been a flourishing deaconess movement which had contributed significantly to the life and ministry of Baptist work in Queensland, but it had not survived.

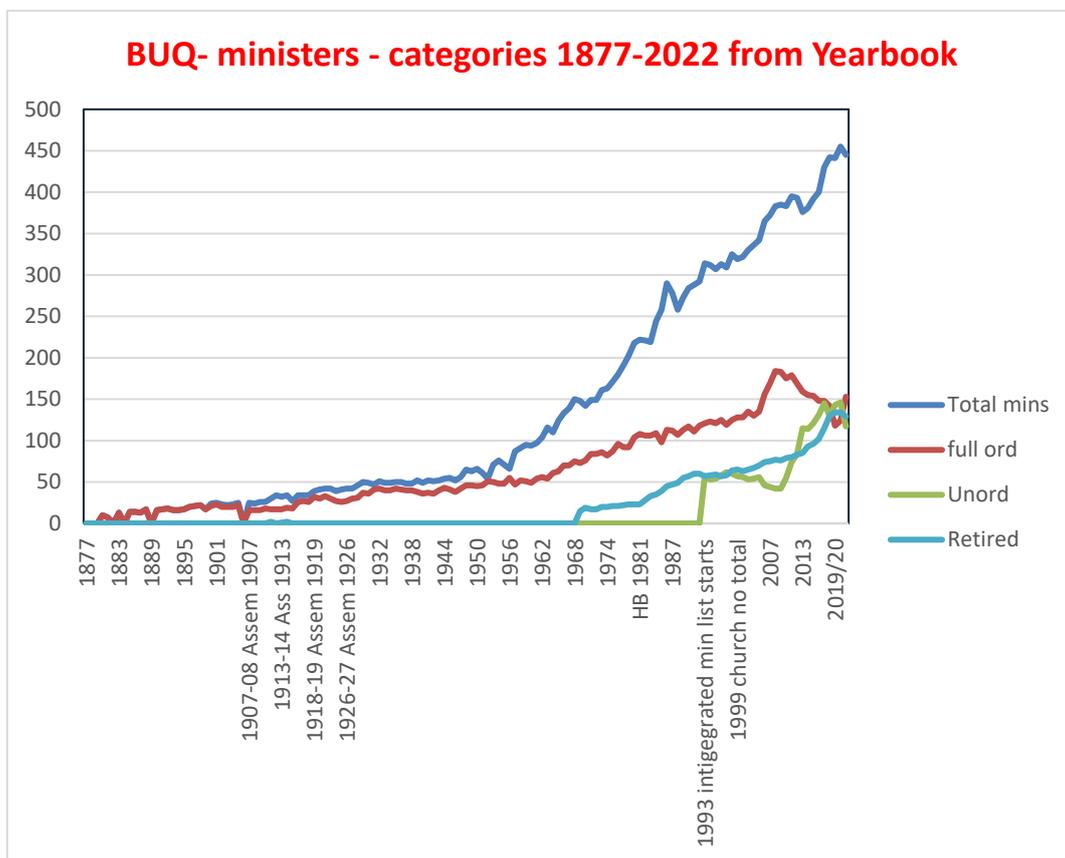
However, with the advent of the system of Registration, women could be registered in the same way as men, although they could not go on to ordination. So the category 'pastoral assistant' was absorbed into 'registered minister un-ordained.' In the current lists, there is no way of determining whether a person is male or female, but it is believed there may be about 22 women in the 2022 list, or 5% of the total.

### **Summary**

So in summary, there are currently 159 listed churches with 270 fully qualified ministers registered, a change over 20 years from 168 churches and 184 officially recognized ministers and pastoral assistants. This represents an increase of 1.1 fully recognized ministers per church in 2002 to 1.7 in 2022. By comparison, a century ago, the ratio was typically far less than 1 minister per church.

There has also been a change from ordination as the regular standard of ministry to Registration (which incidentally allows for women in ministry to be recognized) and also a vastly more complex process for the initial accrediting of ministers and for their continued recognition. From 2020, a full-time position was created within the Baptist Union to manage these processes.

A century ago there were 3202 members, 43 churches with 30 ministers, and at the 50-year mark, the figures were 80 ministers, 117 churches and 7394 members (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Selected data about Baptist Ministers recognized by the Baptist Union of Queensland 1877-2022 taken from official reports and Yearbooks/Directories.**