

Baptist Union of Queensland 2005-2020

A movement in flux

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15 years ago Baptist Heritage Qld published our 150th anniversary history of Baptists in Queensland, *Pressing on with the Gospel*. A lot has happened since then, so now is a good time for an update.

The good news was that in 2005 the Archives moved into the newly opened Gaythorne property, acquiring excellent facilities for the first time. It has developed strongly over the years with a great team, and now offers a top-rate service.

The Gaythorne site of the Baptist Union at 53 Prospect Road (formerly the Australian Catholic University) was opened on 4 September 2005 by Rev David Coffey, one of his first engagements as President of the Baptist World Alliance. This property provided large new headquarters for the Baptist Union, its fifth location since dedicated offices were first acquired in 1960 at 345 Ann Street (a project, including a bookshop, costing about £50,000 initiated by a £50 donation from the Women's Union). In time, the \$3 million property (plus refurbishment costs) became financially viable, and was fully paid off in 2019.

Most departments welcomed the change to the commodious new facility, but it was a completely new day for the theological college—it was now no longer residential, it was co-located with the rest of the Baptist Union operations, and it also changed its name to Malyon College (currently Malyon Theological College), honouring the founding principal. A small full-time faculty assisted by several part-timers cared for about 50 full-time students. Led by its Council, and in its new 3-level building, it was able to develop its tuition which has since gone on-line, enhance its academic status, enlarge its faculty, and offer courses up to doctoral level. Many students are now distance or part-time. Several specialist units have augmented its regular programmes.

A second training unit, Calam (then The Training Collaborative TTC), based originally at Townsville, provided TAFE level courses. After rapid expansion working with many local churches and numerous outside organisations—even interstate, it has since re-focused, working intensively with Baptist Union entities instead. Now located at Gaythorne, it is known as Malyon Vocational Training.

Statistically there has been growth over this 15-year period, from 177 churches with a reported membership of 11,244 (this figure is very rubbery!) to about 200 churches—very diverse in nature, with a total membership of 17,700. One report noted a growing trend towards more larger churches (now 20+ with over 200 members) and also more smaller ones (nearly 90 under 50). The biggest growth has been in multi-cultural churches, numbering 50 groups, covering 15 languages, with some very large. There have been many church plants (not all survived) and many mergers, re-locations and churches with multiple sites; many churches have changed names to project their ethos rather than their location.

There are about 450 ministers (including about 30% retired), up about 23%. They work under a new rigorous recognition system focused especially on 'registration' rather than ordination (which is still for men only and only taken up by about half the pastors). The number of baptisms reported has remained unchanged at around 800.

Mission to Queensland (MTQ), established in 1981 to plant churches in remote and mining areas, now sees itself as a catalyst encouraging existing churches to plant new ones. A recent initiative encourages new models including 'simple', multi-campus and 'hybrid' churches.

Direct financial support of the Baptist Union by churches stands at around \$900,000—an increase of only about 20% despite significant inflation and numerical growth. Extra funds to make up the annual budget, now more than \$3.3 million, are supplied from the Gaythorne property, camping, care ministries and Baplink (the treasury arm). Some of these groups struggled in the early 2000s, seriously impacting the work of the denomination, as did the GFC. But the situation gradually improved due to good planning and administration.

Queensland Baptist Care changed its name to *Carinity* (care+affinity) in 2013 and marked 70 years of operation in 2019. It is now a state-wide operation employing more than 1,300 people, with 11 residential aged care sites, 5 retirement villages, 5 schools, and various services for disabilities, young people, in-home care and families, as well as many institutional chaplains. Having recovered from malicious unfounded attacks on its integrity in recent years, it has developed new properties and is re-furbishing/rebuilding older units. Like other similar organisations, it faces serious challenges in the future.

Camping (QCCC) has also seen major changes since difficult days at the beginning. It works extensively with schools in outdoor education hosting more than 50,000 guests annually. Its three sites (down from 5 originally), including the former college property at Brookfield, are all in popular demand. The premier site at Mapleton recently added an indigenous component, while adventure camping is also a prominent feature. The operations are based on strong foundations related to the 'Triple Mandate' of Scripture.

Administratively in 2005, the denomination was bedding down a new system arising out of reforms of the late 1990s focused on the Board and General Superintendent, supported by Regional Consultants and other entities governed by councils. The role of President, in place since 1877, was last filled in 2009 and abolished soon after—the inevitable result of the decision 20 years earlier to make the General Superintendent the spiritual leader of the denomination.

Increased government regulation in areas such as financial accountability and child safety has severely impacted most areas of work, requiring the denomination to increase its support of churches. Baplink has also provided steadily growing financial services support. Its loan register topped \$100 million, indicating the expanded scope of buildings and property now required.

The BUQ was led for much of the time by a stable group of officers, although there was considerable fluctuation in some areas, and not all ministries flourished. There were many internal reviews, but a major overall denominational review stipulated by the Constitution to be held every 5 years was not carried out until 2017. This revealed many concerning issues, especially the need for new focus, vision and leadership. It has resulted in far-reaching changes, including the abolishment of the positions of General Superintendent and Regional Coordinator.

The new system, with the tag, 'A Collaborative Movement of God-directed Churches and Services', commencing in 2020 has reverted to a pattern similar to the 1980s, involving multiple senior leaders and a buzz of Directors—with nearly a dozen part-time Regional Ministers a new feature.

These are a just a few of the trends in this important period. A full-length account of these 15 years is needed to do justice the period.