

Baptists in Queensland and the Spanish 'Flu' How did they cope in 1919?

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This year's Coronavirus has caused a great deal of disruption to the community, including Baptists in Queensland through cancellation of services and dislocation of ordinary local church life. But back in 1919 when the "Spanish Flu" hit, it was a bit different. At least one church building, Newmarket (now Grange) was actually officially opened with all the usual ceremonial right at the height of the epidemic.

The Flu was rampant in Queensland from early May into June and early July, with the first death (outside quarantine) being recorded on 8 May; restrictions began to be lifted in mid-July (with various dates at different locations across the state). The state had managed to stave off the incursion of the disease for three months or more while it rampaged down south. And of course it had been decimating populations overseas for months before that. Our neighbours, South Africa and New Zealand had been hit particularly hard.

The Flu first appeared in Melbourne on 9 or 10 January 1919, but the government there messed up its handling of the situation by not declaring it under the terms of an agreement reached in a conference of the states and the Commonwealth in November 1918. This agreement required states with the disease to close their borders immediately. But in this case, the disease had escaped into NSW and SA before Victoria took action. As soon as the first official cases were announced in Queensland on May 2, (the initial patients were civilians from a military hospital at Kangaroo Point), borders were closed and a quarantine post was set up on the interstate rail line at Wallangarra where people had to wait a week before proceeding (at their own expense!).

The sudden closure of the borders created lots of "stranded Queenslanders" as they were called. There had already been some cases of the flu at the Commonwealth quarantine base at Lytton but they had been well contained despite fears of people living locally.

The only way the disease could reach Australia was by ships so they had been watched very closely. Many ships were carrying soldiers returning from Europe after World War I so the risk was high. Strict quarantine procedures (a federal responsibility) were developed. But the states, especially Queensland also depended on coastal shipping so there was great danger of the Flu spreading once it arrived. Rail travel was also another potent means of transfer.

But even so, even when the disease was spreading in Queensland, many activities continued to be held. Schools, for example were closed in the metropolitan area, but in the country there were race meetings, country shows and other events still taking place, including gatherings to celebrate the recently signed and highly welcome peace treaty. So there were hot spots, one of which was the Maleny where it was reported that Baptist services had to be cancelled for some weeks.

There was a high mortality rate and the disease could come on people very suddenly. Within hours a person could go from healthy to seriously ill and then death, often in horrific circumstances. Not much was known about the disease and at first it was often confused with "ordinary flu" which was widespread as well. It was usually called "pneumonic influenza" but then just "influenza" to distinguish it from "ordinary influenza". Bed rest was the only treatment, apart from aspirin to deal with pain (often prescribed in dangerously high doses). It was highly infectious and attacked adult men in particular. Many health workers became victims. Suicides were not unknown. Even in ordinary times, medical services were poor for most Queenslanders, so purveyors of "patent medicines" saw an opportunity to make their fortunes!

There were nearly 1000 deaths in Queensland, with over 300 in the Brisbane area. The population of the state was then about 712,000. (Deaths from all causes during the year was 8,856.) The overall death rate increased by nearly 20% in 1919 over the previous year, but this was not as much as in 1884 when dysentery and typhoid caused a 22% jump.

Churches were impacted by the situation. The official regulation issued on 9 May stipulated that unlike other public activities such as theatres, gyms and schools, churches would not be closed. Services could continue provided they were shortened to 45 minutes (so there is a silver lining to every cloud!) and social distancing was observed. They could also be held in the open air without restriction. (There is no record of churches removing roofs to comply—some theatres did offer!). The situation with Sunday Schools was different – confusion is the simplest word to use! The main limitation on church activities seemed to be support. Churches did what they could to keep going, but many events such as anniversaries and picnics were cancelled or postponed (sometimes more than once) due to lack of people being able to

attend. But a huge combined churches peace service was held in Domain on 6 July at which it was estimated 20,000 attended. There were massed bands, a 1000 voice choir and a full roll-up of civic, military and religious officials. The prayer of thanks for victory was offered by Rev W G Pope, minister of the City Tabernacle.

Caring for the sick and their families became a high priority. Women's organisations stepped up to the mark, especially in very needy areas such as Spring Hill, providing food, in-home care and comfort. This was a dangerous and brave ministry with the City Tabernacle and the local Presbyterian churches performing magnificent service. An official community organisation, the Women's Emergency Corps, was set up with government support to patrol streets searching for needy people, offering support with visitation and meals, and assisting in the hospitals. Baptist women's groups either participated in this group or did what they could locally.

Overall, official response was muddled. Australia and Queensland had plenty of warning about the disease compared with the rest of the world, but the response was bungled. There was political wrangling at state and federal levels with Queensland even taking the Commonwealth to court over quarantine matters. The situation was not made any easier because of prolonged drought and extended maritime strikes that left North Queensland in particular in dire need of food. Australia was also far less united socially in the latter days of the War. Thankfully, Australia experienced a far less virulent form of the flu than the rest of the world and recorded the lowest levels of impact. This was even more so for Queensland.

Yet Baptist records show surprisingly few references to the epidemic. There is no mention of the flu in the Executive or Council records for the entire year, although the press reported that the Executive had a serious discussion at its May meeting! There was no state Baptist paper at the time, but the *Australian Baptist*, which usually gave fair coverage to state news, did record a few flu related matters, such as the deaths of three in one family at Rockhampton and a death at Taringa. Albion was disappointed it had not been able to arrange a welcome home service for its returning soldiers; it had also needed to cancel its Sunday School anniversary. At Canungra, the school had been used as a makeshift "hospital" so the Baptist church hall was taken over for the school. At the national level, the biggest impact was probably the cancellation of the conference of state Baptist Unions about the possibility of forming a national body; this move was regarded by some as disappointing and by others as extreme! Conferences were held in 1922 and 1925 and the Federal Union established 25 August 1926.

The reports for the Queensland Annual Assembly held a few months after the epidemic waned actually show a better financial situation than the previous year but otherwise there were only a few minor concerns—such as the Home Mission noting some churches were behind in their contributions, the President was unable to complete his visitation of the northern churches and a missionary event had to be cancelled. The Women's Union had not been able to hold their meeting for a few months. As well as Newmarket, at least two other church buildings were underway including one nearby at Everton Park. Overall, it seemed that the denominational year had been positive! One of the big features of the Assembly was a paper by Mr L C Morris, head of Technical Education in the state, on "The church's relation to social and national rest" resulting in vigorous discussion.

But silence about the influenza epidemic is not unusual. Historians point out that the epidemic seemed to fade from the memory quickly even though the personal, social and economic impact was enormous. Later historical accounts covering various aspects of Queensland life hardly mention the catastrophe, if at all. It seems as if the event was just too difficult to cope with. Perhaps people did not talk about it, but just coped as best they could having already endured so much during the war years. That is what seemed to dominate at the City Tabernacle: even though their ladies had done such a good job caring for the needy at the height of the epidemic, their annual report for the following year only looked back to "the aftermath of the war", and generally the effects of sin on the world.

This is a strange phenomenon. But if this devastating episode had been remembered better, perhaps lessons could have been learned so that a century later, we would have been better able to cope!