

Baptists in Queensland and COVID-19

by David Parker

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The 'Spanish 'Flu' epidemic struck Queensland a century ago, but there is hardly any reference to it in official Baptist records. That is far from the case with the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020—documents about it have proliferated wildly! This is a brief personal account (May 2021) of how Baptists in Queensland responded over the first year. Baptist Heritage Qld/Baptist Archives intend to document fully the impact of COVID-19 and to collect key documents for the record. It is hoped to produce another version of this paper when more information requested from Baptist Union officials is received.

Note that information mentioned here is as accurate as possible but often official announcements were detailed and subject to many qualifications, and in the records dating was often ambiguous, making a precise account difficult. See *QB Forum* 106 August 2020 for our article, 'Baptists in Queensland and the Spanish 'Flu Epidemic, 1919'.

The COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, first appeared in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (or perhaps much earlier) and the first death in that country was confirmed on 11 January 2020. It was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation on 11 March 2020. The first case in Australia appeared on 25 January 2020 in Victoria.

Little was known about the disease at first, and methods of handling it had to be developed quickly. Soon most countries were affected, many extremely seriously and with recurring waves, often amidst a lot of political wrangling and organisational failures. Towards the end of 2020, several vaccines had been developed, bringing some hope of controlling the pandemic, but there had been no other advances in handling the disease, and outbreaks in 2021 were in many cases, worse than ever.

By April 2021, more than 134 million cases had been recorded worldwide, with almost 3 million deaths, making it one of the worst pandemics in human history. In the meantime, the global economy and social fabric had been seriously disrupted.

COVID-19 in Queensland

The first case in Queensland was announced on 29 January 2020 and the same day, a public health emergency was declared by the state government (the first state to do so) and strengthened soon after, giving the Chief Health Officer immense powers to control the state in response to the pandemic, akin to 'martial law'. The number of cases increased in the following days until on 20 March Australia's international borders were closed. On 23 March many businesses and non-essential services were closed, causing enormous economic and personal hardship. Schools were closed from 26 March with children forced to be home-schooled, and on the same day, Queensland's borders were closed for the first time in 100 years.

The first death in Queensland was reported on 29 March (although a Queenslander had died in NSW earlier). On 30 March, a lock-down began confining people to their homes except for certain specified reasons.

The worst of the crisis began to ease by the fourth week of April, without the thousands of deaths and totally overwhelmed medical system originally feared. On 26 April, the first relaxation of stay-at-home restrictions was announced to take effect on 1 May. For the rest of the year, life in Queensland returned to a semblance of normality under various restrictions, some of which were increased or re-imposed, often at short notice, in response to outbreaks in various areas.

COVID-19 and Baptists in Queensland

The impact on churches was extensive with the closure of church services and home gatherings from 23 March, and severe restrictions on weddings and funerals. Church buildings displayed dismal 'Closed' signs.

The sudden imposition of these measures required churches to respond quickly by trying to offer at least some kind of ministry using whatever means were available. The widespread use of social media and the internet generally provided a partial solution through live-streaming or pre-recorded services.



However, because of the stay-at-home lock-down laws and the ban on non-essential businesses, church buildings could not be used for services, so on-line services were presented from homes. However, a ruling on 6 April (just in time for Easter) that churches were deemed places of work allowed for small numbers of staff only to conduct and video services in churches.

Pastors were faced with preaching to a camera only, musical teams had to be reduced drastically and production was limited to one camera operator. However, the successful (and as it turned out, long-term) use of technologies like these required capabilities that not all churches could support. This meant that in many cases, the quality was well below par in terms of content, presentation and technical skill. Furthermore, it seemed that some were not aware of or concerned about the poor quality of these presentations. Contact with parishioners via Zoom or similar video conferencing platforms, and by phone and messaging services was also important. Church administration and organisational life required similar methods. The conduct of communion services and baptisms called for considerable adaption.

Financially churches were faced with the problem of not being able to depend on the traditional system of giving via collection plates, but electronic giving (which had already become more common) quickly took up the slack, resulting in good, even increased, support. Churches also benefitted from government financial aid with the result that, contrary to what might have been expected, the overall financial position of churches turned out to be more or less satisfactory.

Baptist Union responses

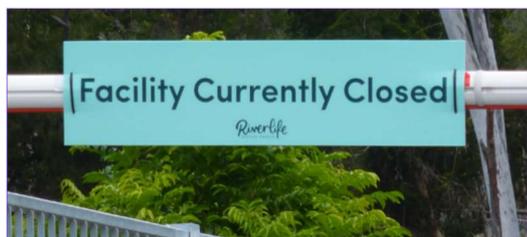
At the Baptist Union level, the first public statement came from the Director of QB Services (DOS), Rev Stewart Pieper, on 5 March 2020. It was a formal notice largely quoting verbatim from official government documents about the nature of COVID-19 and responses to it which, it was believed, 'might be of assistance' to churches. The statement ended by announcing, 'At this stage there is no need to cancel any events or gatherings or take additional precautions to normal practice.' However, on 23 March, the DOS issued a much more radical notice advising that church services, weddings and funerals were now all highly restricted.

From this point on for several weeks, there were many advisories and other documents from the Baptist Union, sometimes almost daily. These relayed the official government regulations (with some often convoluted notes on implementation), along with health directives, information about government financial aid, and other details, including just one of the many new issues to be considered—copyright requirements for on-line services. Churches were updated by the regular weekly emailed Baptist Union newsletters from the Director of Administration and the Director of Services, the latter usually concluding with a biblical text for encouragement.

The QB administration took rapid steps to respond to the new situation. The Board set up a specialised task force in early April to manage QB measures. Board meetings were conducted virtually and various other events were also transferred to this medium, including prayer gatherings involving pastors and churches.

Scheduled events and processes needed to be managed. The annual Convention and Business Day (Assembly), which was due to be held as soon as 14-17 April, was postponed to a date to be fixed. The Pastors and Spouses Conference usually held prior to the Assembly was summarily cancelled. Similarly, development of the annual budget, which would have been adopted at the Business Day, was postponed.

The print version of the *QB magazine* was suspended due, it was explained, to high production costs and because of the cancellation of church services which were the main avenues of distribution. On-line versions continued but updating was spasmodic. The editor left the position after 12 months, and the print version remained suspended.



The QB office at Gaythorne was closed to the public as of 30 March, and the staff worked in two teams, week about at home and the office, with some on leave. A number of staff members were put off in early July due to the impact of the situation.

To help churches deal with the impact of the restrictions and the pandemic, the Baptist Union authorised Rev Mark Westhuyzen, who had only just taken up his role in the new position of Director of Pastoral Services, to offer assistance on the use of technology to conduct services, and importantly, to organise a series of on-line 'Pastors' Forums'. With the assistance of Rev Dr Ian Hussey (Malyon Theological College), these were conducted from 16 April 2020 (weekly at first) and covered a wide range of topics. The first was 'Maintaining Real Community in Social Isolation', and the next, 'Working from home'. Other topics included church finances under Covid, theological reflections on how the situation impacted thinking about the church and its mission, reviewing the progress and prospects of church life under Covid conditions, and later, when the situation was improving, the future of

the church post-Covid, and strategies for recovery. From September, the frequency of these seminars was reduced, and the themes morphed into more general areas.

The interim Director of Movement (DOM), Rev Dr John Sweetman also distributed various documents reflecting on pastoral ministry, worship services and church life under Covid conditions, some of which were his own, and others contributions by other QB staff or drawn from additional sources. Topics included ideas for ministering in a Covid context (theoretical ideas and actual examples), biblical reflection on 'digital church' and the ideal length of sermons under Covid. The Baptist Union staff also prepared some sermon ideas and video sermons for use by churches, using a newly set-up studio at the QB Centre.

Particular attention was given to the Ethnic Churches, and Director, Rev Emil Rahimov, devoted much effort relaying and explaining to pastors and church leaders the details and implications of the various government regulations. Financially these churches were protected from some of the worst aspects of the pandemic because most pastors were bi-vocational. However, the churches were typically under strain because they wanted to assist their families and church people in their homelands where the COVID-19 situation was typically extremely serious.

Impact on ministries

The various ministry arms of the Baptist Union were also impacted by the pandemic and the official measures dealing with it.

The camping ministry, QCCC, was affected seriously, due to the mandated shutting down of all school and other camping activity. From 20 March 2020, all camp sites were closed and about 120 staff stood down although significant help was to be received from the government JobKeeper scheme (especially for the newly opened Noosa camp site). QCCC reported that it suffered more than \$2.5 million in losses due to cancellation of bookings. Generous financial assistance and support from the Baptist Union and Baplink helped considerably. QCCC was proactive in the development of the industry plan for camping and in lobbying the government over the regulations.

The welfare arm, Carinity, was also affected seriously. In other states, there had been many outbreaks of Covid in aged care homes causing serious concern and lock-downs. However, Carinity only suffered one such case, which was at its Laidley facility where, as late as September 2020, a staff member contracted the disease, causing a two-week shut-down. However, all Carinity's aged care work came under the general restrictions which were routinely imposed by the government on this sector whenever there was an outbreak of the disease.

Malyon Theological College was also impacted, cancelling all physical lectures and activity from late March. But thanks to earlier developments in on-line learning, it was able to make cope and continued the year with little overall difficulty and with encouraging enrolments.

Recovery

By May 2020 there were definite signs that the restrictions imposed on the community would be lifted gradually and, over the next few weeks, a palpably hopeful feeling began to appear with the announcement that the curve of new cases had been 'flattened'. A 3-stage 'road to recovery' was announced by the federal government on 8 May, which would be applied in each state according to local conditions, followed by a very gradual reopening of some businesses, albeit with limited levels of activity (the original dates were brought forward due to favourable conditions). The lock-down of aged care facilities was lifted on 16 June, and state borders were opened on 10 July (except for Victoria where there was a serious 'second wave' of infections which would last for many more weeks and result in over 800 deaths—in fact Victoria had 90% of the Australian death toll).

However, there were still serious restrictions on church services, weddings and funerals. At the beginning of June, only 20 people were permitted at services, 20 at weddings and 100 at funerals. An 'industry plan' was being prepared by the Centre for Interfaith and Cultural Dialogue at Griffith University involving 21 groups (nearly half non-Christian) which would allow for up to 100 people to attend services albeit with greater restrictions regarding hygiene, serving of food and the registering of attendees. There was also a density limit (more restricted if singing was to take place), involving division of attendees into separate groups.

This Plan was announced in early June, and implemented in early July, but Baptist Union officials reported that it was not as they had expected it would be—in fact although the churches had been part of the initial discussion, they (including the Baptists) had not been privy to some of the last-minute changes to the published version.



This Plan operated for a while as an optional alternative to the previous provisions. Then it became the sole requirement and, updated in the following months, did ultimately provide more certainty for the new routine of ‘Covid-safe’ church which had emerged. This involved taking personal details of attendees, density limits, (anti-social) physical distancing, no handshakes, and contact-less refreshments. Churches now often displayed unwelcoming signs (and web-page information) advising that attendance required prior on-line or phone registration! Although the Industry Plan allowed for a ‘new normal’ of physical attendance at services, many churches retained their on-line presence for the sake of those who felt nervous about attending in person and also in the interests of outreach—some churches had reported promising results from their electronic ministry (including Sunday services and also small groups).

All this put a strain on the leadership and active workers. However, a survey of pastors carried out ‘during the lull’ in June 2020 (by the National Church Life Survey NCLS under commission) reported that they had coped ‘reasonably well’, a result that was considered ‘better than we expected’, although some were ‘doing it tough’, especially those who were already struggling with pre-existing pressures.

Queensland was the first state to open camping again, so QCCC was able to resume partial operation in mid-June (for small groups) and more fully from mid-July, although under tight controls. Malyon College resumed on-site activities also from mid-July. The QB administration soon began at least some physical meetings again in late June and the office building opened again under Covid-safe conditions some time later. The postponed Assembly was held on 30 October 2020 at the Riverlife Baptist Church, Seventeen Mile Rocks, and dealt with several important measures relating to the recent QB Review and the adoption of the delayed budget.

Meanwhile the Futures Task Force had been preparing reports which were submitted during the second half of the year setting out observations and anticipated developments in worship, evangelism, pastoral leadership and other topics in the new Covid environment.

So after a year or more, the situation improved, apart from regular flare-ups and new more contagious strains of the virus causing reimposition of restrictions—although the disease was at crisis levels in many other parts of the world. By the end of May 2021 there had been a total of just over 1600 cases in Queensland and only 7 deaths.

Early (and persistent) intervention including lock-downs, contact tracing and border closures (sometimes erratic, and leading to the virtual balkanisation of the country) had been credited as the reasons for the favourable situation locally. However, it had come at considerable cost to the economy (especially hospitality and tourism—key sectors for Queensland) and the loss of much personal privacy and freedom—a situation previously completely unthinkable. Sudden imposition of restrictions (and often apparently heartless bans on family reunions) left people nervously fearful of the future, and crippled social recovery.

Despite the severity of these restrictions and curtailments to normal life, there had been little public questioning of the necessity, legitimacy, fairness, effectiveness and broader social impact of these measures although there were reports of such action by leading clerics in the southern states on more than one occasion. There were occasional hints of some behind-the-scenes lobbying of government officials by church and other leaders. Alarmist media reports and unreliable, even toxic, social media activity did little to help. Some political leaders, especially in Queensland, certainly strengthened their electoral positions enormously by adopting a harsh stance on restrictions and border closures under the mantra of ‘keeping Queenslanders safe’.

Baptists, like the rest of the community, had been obliged to cope with the on-going and every-changing restrictions. Churches were conducting regular activities as best they could within the prescribed limits. The Baptist Union Assembly for 2021 was held on schedule on 16 April at the usual location, Mapleton Family Centre. The reports which covered the Covid-year, 2020, revealed a much more hopeful situation than might have been expected, especially in terms of the overall financial situation and the impact on pastors and church life.

However, according to the annual reports, total church membership did drop for the first time in a decade to around 18,000, and the total church community also dropped by 2,000 to 53,000. However, church giving and support of the Baptist Union budget improved by 5-6%. Reports indicated that smaller and medium-sized churches were mostly regaining the numbers of attendees pre-Covid but larger churches were not doing so well.

A year like no other

The year had forced churches to adapt their procedures and caused extensive changes in attitudes, methods and expectations. The Baptist Union in its new structure took a strong lead—not least because the government regime enforced such an approach—in detailing the application of the regulations and providing support at different levels. This role seemed to be accepted by the churches so that the status of the denominational organisation received a

considerable boost. The influence of local pastors was also boosted because they were making the decisions about church life, with little or no reference to the membership.

Rev Dr John Sweetman, who had been the leading figure in the 2017-2019 QB Review, was well placed to offer leadership, being already well known in the denomination and having come out of retirement to take on the role of Interim Director of the QB Movement (DOM) for the year. He devoted considerable time to the emergency and was prolific in issuing documents designed to support churches and pastors, including personal insights and collating those from others. His observations ranged from a discussion of the new 'pyjama church' (people preferring to watch church from home over the internet—said to be affecting larger churches more than others) and the concept of 'digital church' to the intricacies of working with Zoom and the pressure of constant change. In May 2021, his three significant 'post-lockdown observations' were that people were now 'much more familiar with online technologies', they were 'more reluctant to volunteer' and were 'more critical of the church'.

According to the chairman of the Board, Rev Peter Sweetman (the brother of Interim DOM), the charter groups and the denominational office were led by competent and dedicated officers who managed the situation well—apparently the newly introduced structure of the denomination and its recently appointed officials proved effective under the sudden unexpected pressure. He also observed that there had been considerable collaboration right across the churches, which tied in with one of the values of the new denominational vision. In the chairman's view, on-line methods of ministry, although forced on the churches, could turn out to be a powerful new tool for ministry across the vast state of Queensland, although he conceded that regular 'old-fashioned' local church commitment might never be the same again.

The flow of documents from the Baptist Union abated somewhat as the crisis lessened. They had mainly focused on the activities of pastors and the successful operation of the churches. There was little if any comment on the many issues raised by the pandemic and its handling—such as the disastrous impact on the economy, mental health, family and social relationships, education, and community needs, not to mention various theological and ethical issues created by this unexpected and unwelcome development.

But overall, the Baptist Union had appeared to respond to Covid much more intentionally than its counterpart a century earlier. However, it is hard to see how the 1919 Flu epidemic did not impact churches just as strongly, but with so few records available from that time, is it difficult to know exactly what took place.

Perhaps they were just more stoic then!