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Local Revivals in Australia

by Stuart Piggin

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Be encouraged to pray

until the inundation of the Spirit comes.

I want to advance four propositions about the history of revivals in Australia, and then comment on the prospects for revival in Australia today.

Four propositions

1. Local revivals have been frequent in Australian history.

In my research I have found references to 71 local revivals in nineteenth century Australia. And far from being impervious to revival, the twentieth century has witnessed more revivals than any previous age. This century has witnessed the greatest growth ever in the Christian Church, and revival in Africa, Asia, and South America is endemic.

In Australia the new century began with the largest evangelistic campaigns in Australia's history. R. A. Torrey arrived in Melbourne (April 1902) following successful evangelistic tours in Japan and China. Attendances totalled a quarter of a million each week when the population of the whole of Victoria was only one million. Meanwhile, in 1902/3 a tent mission crusade throughout 200 country towns of NSW reported 25,000 inquirers.

In the 1920s there were rather spectacular revivals associated with Pentecostalism. In 1925 a revival broke out in the Melbourne suburb of Sunshine. Hundreds came under conviction of sin, were filled by the Great Baptiser, and created such excitement that people came from all over Australia to receive blessing. Out of this was formed the Pentecostal Church of Australia.

The 1930s, the decade of the African revival, witnessed scenes of considerable spiritual vitality in Melbourne. The Methodist Local Preachers Branch was very vigorous and had an impact on evangelical life in Australia. Teams of these local preachers went all over Australia and New Zealand. For many years it held a Holiness Convention each King's Birthday weekend in Melbourne. It was conducted entirely by laymen. A Baptist minister, George Hall, who trained in America under Dr R. A. Torrey and Dr Campbell Morgan, and who knew evangelical life in USA intimately, said the Methodist Local Preachers Melbourne Branch Holiness Convention was the greatest spiritual force he had ever experienced.

The 1930s also saw scenes of revival in Queensland, especially connected with the Pentecostal branch of Methodism. Revivals were reported at Woombye, Kingscliffe, and Toowoomba. One who was used in this work was Booth Clibborn, grandson of William Booth. Other effective evangelists were Gavin Hamilton, Hyman Appleman, Garry Love and Gypsy Smith. The aboriginal pastor, Rodney Minniecon, now at Griffith, was a product of the same movement.

There were revivals associated with the name of Geoff Bingham in Australia in the 1960s and 1970s, some remarkable

occasions associated with the Jesus movement, particularly among young people in Melbourne, and, of course, revival broke among aborigines on Elcho Island in March 1979.

2. Evidence indicates that local revivals have been genuine.

Consider the revival at Kiama in 1864 under the ministry of the Rev. Thomas Angwin, a

Methodist. His sermons revealed a knowledge of 'the deep things of God', and congregations and prayer meetings grew in number, swelled by Presbyterians and Anglicans who sought a richer fare than they were receiving in their own churches. On 'one of the later Sundays' in July 1864 the revival came:

The arrows were sharp in the hands of the King's messenger
that night. They were straightly aimed, and shot with all
the intensity of a love baptised with the compassion of the
Christ. ... The next night there was almost equally as large
a congregation at the prayer meeting. Then began what the
good old people called 'a breaking down'. The communion rail
was crowded with seekers. Some hoarheaded men were amongst
them; a storekeeper in the town, notorious for his fearful
temper and furious conduct when under its influence; some
gentlespirited women; a number of senior lads from the Sunday
schools ... Night after night for the rest of the week and
into the middle of the next, the meetings continued. ... It was
a revival which gave workers to the Church, teachers to the
Sunday School, local preachers to the circuit plan and
ultimately several ministers to the Australian Methodist Church.

(Carruthers 1922:32)

Revival in Australian Methodism in the second half of the nineteenth century is mainly associated with John Watsford, the first Australianborn Methodist clergyman. In Ballarat in the 1860s, in Parramatta, in the inner city suburbs of Surry Hills and Balmain, and in country town such as Windsor and Goulburn, Watsford was used to ignite the fires of revival. Of a service in the Bourke Street Methodist church, Sydney, in 1860, Watsford (1901:123) reported:

To a congregation which packed the building I preached from
'Quench not the Spirit'. What a time we had. The whole
assembly was mightily moved, the power was overwhelming;
many fell to the floor in agony, and there was a loud cry
for mercy. The police came rushing in to see what was the

matter; but there was nothing for them to do. It was impossible to tell how many penitents came forward; there must have been over two hundred. The large schoolroom was completely filled with anxious inquirers.

3. Revivals have raised moral standards of whole communities.

The 1902/3 tent meeting crusade in rural NSW crusade which resulted in the conversion of

25,000 was nowhere more wonderful in its manifestation than in the coal mining villages of the Illawarra when 2735 professed conversion or some 15% of the region's population. The fire of the Spirit fell on each coal mining village in a work described as 'gloriously monotonous'. At Mt Kembla 131 professed conversions; Mt Keira 214; Balgownie 183; Bulli 292; Helensburgh 234 and so on. At Mt Kembla 'an intense emotion with an evident assent to the Preacher's burning words were imprinted on every face and feature'.

What about the impact on the moral tone of the community? At Mt Keira swearing disappeared and the pit ponies in the mines stopped work as they could no longer understand their instructions, a phenomenon also reported in the Welsh revival 3 years later. Asked what was the evidence that the revival was genuine, the Rev. D. O'Donnell replied that the question was a very proper one, since there should be 'works meet for repentance'. He catalogued four evidences:

First, payment of debts. Tradesmen report the settlement of accounts they had long regarded as bad. Second, a pure language.

... It is said that in the Mount Keira pit an oath has scarcely been heard since the Mission . . . Third, a fair day's work.

The proprietor of one of the mines told me that the biggest day's output of coal they ever had, followed the Mission. Fourth, attendance at Church. All the churches report greatly increased congregations and increase in the membership (Colwell 1904:630).

The great revivals of the past have always resulted in a decline in national illegality and

immorality. The same is true of the Billy Graham Crusades in Australia in 1959. The number of convictions for all crimes committed in Australia doubled between 1920 and 1950 and then doubled again between 1950 and 1959 when the population increased by only onequarter. Then, in 1960, 1961, and 1962, the number of convictions remained fairly constant, resuming its dramatic upward trend in the middle and late 60s.

The illegitimate birthrate was also investigated to get some rough index to noncriminal

community standards. In the period 1955 to 1965 this index rose every year to almost double the 1954 figure, but the year it rose slowest (.06%) was in 1960. The illegitimate children not conceived in 1959 were not born in 1960!

Turning to alcohol consumption, the Bureau of Statistics supplied the following figures.

Annual Per Capita Consumption of Beer in Australia in Litres

195859 111.01

196869 113.5

197879 133.2

This also reveals the same deteriorating trends as we have seen in all the other social indicators. It is therefore striking to learn that the figure for 196061 is 100.1, that is 10% lower than the 195859 figure, an unexpected and dramatic fall.

4. Revival comes with social salvation to marginalised and underprivileged groups.

Today's aborigines, who number about 150,000 in Australia, are experiencing revival, with some of their own movement emerging. There has been a change in the tone of communities touched by revival: less drunkenness, petrol sniffing, and fighting; greater conscientiousness in work; an increased boldness in speaking out against social injustices. At the Anglican Roper River Mission (Ngukurr) which had been reduced to a social disaster area by the granting of a liquor licence, the revival, which began in 1979, came as a form of social salvation. Sister Edna Brooker exclaimed: 'New life has come to Ngukurr. Half the population say they have turned to Christ and the transformation from alcohol, petrol sniffing and immorality is very wonderful' (Boyd 1986).

At Warburton in Western Australia 500 came to the Lord and were baptised. At Wiluna crime dropped to zero and the local publican had to put on free beer to entice people back into his pub.

So, revival comes as a form of social salvation to a needy people. In Australia the major

perceived problems are economic recession and malaise; unemployment; marital breakdown and the poverty of relationships; drugs; death on the roads; environmental rape; demoralisation of the young. Revival would be the chief means of energising the Church in general and Christians in particular to address these problems.

Prospects for revival in Australia

1. Revivals are often caught rather than taught.

Many people, particularly in the missionary movement, are learning about revival which is

endemic in other parts of the world and are bringing what they have learned back to Australia.

Australian missionaries working in Africa learned much from the East African revival which began in Ruanda in 1931. Revival has been endemic in the Solomons since the early 1970s. Among the missionaries was George Strachan who has written an instructive book entitled *Revival: its blessings and battles*. There, for example, he answered the important question, 'Why do revivals not start?'

Lack of real prayer is a major hindrance. For many of us

prayer is of no great importance. It is just an 'extra' to

a busy life. But prayer that brings power takes precedence

over all else. Nothing should be allowed to steal away time

spent with God in prayer (1989:55).

In 1962 Geoff Bingham, who had been influenced by the East African revival, returned from Pakistan. That year Bingham taught at a teaching mission at Thornleigh. He taught all the great truths which had crystallised for him when he experienced revival in Pakistan: the holiness of God; the tyrants which hold people in bondage, namely sin, the flesh, Satan, principalities and powers; God's wrath, the conscience, the law. He then showed how all of those have a hold over us because of guilt, but that when the guilt was taken away in the cross so the bondage is taken away.

A prayer meeting before the mission was held in the home of Fred George, a returned CMS missionary from Tanzania. About thirty people attended it. At first the meeting was fairly routine with prayer for the church and mission, and then Geoff said 'I think that the Lord wants to bring home to us now what the Lord thinks of us.' He read from Psalm 24, 'Who shall ascend to the hill of the Lord? He who has clean hands and a pure heart.'

Then he suggested that those present should come to the Lord and ask him to reveal himself. They all knelt down in a circle, and then someone began to weep, and a great conviction came over all of them. Some tried to pray, but dissolved in sobs.

One who could not attend that mission because he was sick was John Dunn. At that home prayer meeting there came over John Dunn an incredible sense of his own depravity in the sight of God. He saw something extraordinary. It was as if he were standing outside himself, looking at himself. And he wanted to flee from himself as fast and as far as he could because of the horrific sight he had of his own sin. He was crushed and broke down and sobbed convulsively, and the others around him were prostrate on the floor, broken hearted.

Then a gentle quietness came over the whole group, and then a wonderful sense of God's total forgiveness. Then they sang and sang until they were hoarse. The singing and intercession just went on and on, until someone said, 'It's half past four in the morning'. Everyone was staggered that so much time had elapsed.

2. The Theology of Revival is increasingly studied and understood.

The thinking of some of the most influential evangelical teachers and preachers of the twentieth century leaves room for revival e.g. Martyn Lloyd Jones and J. I. Packer. Packer, for example, tells us that the Puritans did not use the word revival much they spoke of godliness, by which they meant revival. There is an increasing study and appreciation of the writings of the church's greatest theologian of revival, Jonathan Edwards. Bingham has written over 150 books. Many of them bear on revival. Then there is the excellent study material of the Fellowship for Revival's Academy prepared by the Rev. Robert Evans, 57 Talbot Road, Hazelbrook, NSW, 2779. So there is ample opportunity for the Christian to study the whole issue and theology of revival.

3. Revival is usually preceded by unprecedented unity.

Unity among Christians must involve greater cooperation between Evangelicals and Charismatics.

This will require godly leadership from those who have been given leadership roles in those

branches of the Christian church. I think that there has been such a stand off between the two that I have been advancing a theology which might bring them both together on what they agree about the Holy Spirit rather than have them arguing over what they disagree about the Holy Spirit.

We all agree that the most fundamental work of the Holy Spirit is to convict of sin and to

regenerate and sanctify. Let us all evangelical and charismatic meet together and pray for a great outpouring of these things rather than arguing over disputed matters such as gifts and exorcisms.

4. Revival comes when we move together.

Revival is the river of God's love flowing freely and fully through the Church, and it may come when the existing tributaries start to flow together.

a. In late 1989 the first of the prayer meetings for a spiritual awakening within the Anglican church was held in Lindfield, a Sydney suburb. That has expanded and some 26 regional groups are now meeting to pray for revival. This involves about 6000 folk in prayer for the revival of the church and the spread of the gospel. Much blessing is being reported. There are churches which as a result of their involvement with this are reactivating their prayer life. One church reports conversions every week. At a time when the Anglican church is divided over so many issues it is great that Anglicans should be able to draw together to pray in this way.

b. The Fellowship of Revival in the Uniting Church has nurtured such wonderful Christians as Dr Robert Hillman. His life and his lectures on the ministry of intercession will continue to speak to the Church and sensitise it to its need for revival.

c. Then there are such groups of faithful souls longing for revival as Intercessors for Australia, and Aussies Afire launched by the Bishop of Grafton in 1989. There is also Fusion and Aussie Awakening, headed up by Mal Garvin.

d. Bishop Dudley Foord, an organiser of the Sydney Anglican prayer gatherings, spoke at the National Parliamentary breakfast in Canberra. This was a great opportunity to remind the nation that national regeneration or the restoration of a demoralised people is a spiritual matter primarily and only secondarily an economic matter. Then Bishop Foord and Glenda Welden, the wife of the publisher, Kevin Welden, and a member of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, attended the first international Prayer Leaders Conference organised as part of the Lausanne Commission on World Evangelisation.

The rain clouds of blessing are gathering. Be encouraged to pray until the inundation of the Spirit comes.

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