

Uniting Church History and Heritage

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FROM THE CHAIR

Rev. Professor Glen O'Brien



I had the wonderful opportunity in the first week of October to meet with Pope Francis at the Vatican as part of the Methodist-Roman Catholic International Commission (MERCIC). The longest running dialogue between the Catholic Church and any other body, MERCIC has met every year since 1967. The Uniting Church in Australia values its membership in the World Methodist Council (WMC) and it was an honour to be one of eight WMC participants to meet with eight Catholic members around the theme of Unity in Mission. In a private audience, Pope

Francis told Commission members that the dialogue between Catholics and Methodists was not about Methodists returning to the Catholic fold. Rather, both communities, like prodigals, had strayed from the Father's house and are welcomed back by God in reconciliation and forgiveness.

This year begins a new 5 year-round of dialogue and comes at a significant time in the life of the wider church including the 1700th anniversary (in 2025) of the Council of Nicaea and this year's 60th Anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. We also had the opportunity to meet with Cardinal Mario Grech who is overseeing a new process of synodality in the Catholic Church and were hosted by Her Excellency, Chiara Porro, Australian Ambassador to the Holy See for a magnificent vegetarian meal. Commission members delivered a public lecture on *God in Christ Reconciling*, at the Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas, reporting on the results of the previous Dialogue. Of course, there was also time for some sightseeing in the Eternal City, including the Colosseum, the Sistine Chapel, and the Roman Forum. More info on the Commission's work can be found here: <https://meorome.org/2022/10/10/news-communicue-from-methodist-catholic-commission-plenary-october-2022/>

My assigned paper was on 'Wesleyan Modes of Conferencing' which began with John Wesley's autocratic rule over the early Methodist conferences and ended with a description of the Uniting Church's consensus decision making process. The UCA introduced consensus decision-making into all its interconnected councils—Congregation, Presbytery, Synod, and Assembly—in 1994. Jill Tabart (UCA President from 1994–1997), developed the process and guided the Church in its use. I explained to the MERCIC members how coloured cards are used to indicate the level of agreement with a proposal with orange indicating warmth, blue coolness and yellow a desire to speak, and how the Chair hopes to look out upon a warm sea of orange cards at which point the words, 'we have consensus' are announced and the matter is settled. Consensus decision-making can be seen as an explicit critique of the previously existing Standing Orders and Rules of Debate (based on the Westminster parliamentary system used by the precedent denominations) as potentially adversarial and obstructionist, often resulting in unhelpful binaries such as 'winners and losers', 'carried and lost', 'passed and failed'. The new system gained the attention of the World Council of Churches which first adopted consensus decision making at its 9th Assembly meeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 2006 and has continued its use down to the present. The World Communion of Reformed Churches and The World Methodist Council have both since adopted consensus decision making processes. Terence Corkin from the UCA and Julia Kuhn Wallace (now Sharp)—an American United Methodist—have written a book on consensus-based

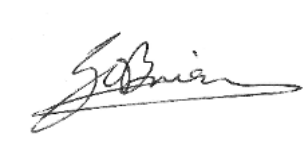
discernment which offers a toolkit *The Church Guide for Making Decisions Together* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2017).

According to Tabart, 'Consensus is a process of seeking the common mind of the meeting without resorting to a formal vote, and engaging in genuine dialogue that is respectful, mutually supportive and empowering whilst prayerfully seeking to discern God's will.' (Jill Tabart, 'Coming to Consensus,' *Uniting Church in Australia Assembly*, 8 February 2019 <https://assembly.org.au/news/item/2787-coming-to-consensus>, accessed 18 August 2022). Its benefits include a greater openness to discern the leading of the Spirit in community, since the focus is less on the need to win an argument. Those who feel they do not have good public speaking skills can ensure their voice is both seen and heard in their use of the coloured card system. While it doesn't eliminate oratorical grandstanding, it lessens the potential for it to some extent, especially as time limits are placed on speakers. At least theoretically, when decisions are arrived at through consensus, rather than through the loudest voices, there is a greater sense of corporate ownership of the decisions made.

Such principles and practices of decision-making recognise that the church is both a fully human and a fully divine institution. We are called in Scripture to "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3). This suggests that the unity of the Spirit is a gift already given which needs only to be 'kept' in peaceable ways. The need for some kind of decision making instrument, whether parliamentary procedure or consensus, is a recognition that as humans we may err, and we do not yet have an unhindered beatific vision of the divine will and purpose. Yet there is a corresponding confidence that when we meet together with a prayerful openness to God and to one another, a real, if not infallible, discernment will be given to indicate the best course of action. When the first century church met in Jerusalem to discuss regulations around the inclusion of Gentile believers, it determined that its final determination, "seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us", (Acts 15:28) a neat encapsulation of the human and divine aspects of decision making. John Wesley's description of 'Christian conferencing' as a "prudential means of grace" still guides Methodist and Uniting/United Churches in their conferencing patterns which, while they do not claim divine

authority, have proven prudent to employ for "the people of God on the way".

Yours,



(Rev. Professor) Glen O'Brien

Chair, Uniting Church National History Society

Appointment as Professor

Congratulations to Professor Glen O'Brien, appointed Professor of the University by the University Council on 9 November 2022. Professor O'Brien is Research Coordinator and Lecturer at Eva Burrows College. He is noted for his outstanding contributions to Research and Leadership in the Academy.

The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Peter Sherlock, said: "Professor O'Brien is an outstanding historian who plays a vital role by ensuring Christian communities understand their past, and how the many strands of Christian tradition can inform our service of God and neighbour into the future. His creative intellect is evident in his exploration not only of Wesleyan holiness traditions but also of emerging directions in futurism. The University looks forward to Professor O'Brien's continued leadership as a teacher, researcher and Chair of Examiners with a passion for collaboration".

The citation, in part, reads:

Professor Glen O'Brien is an outstanding historian of Methodism, in its historical origins and its distinctive expression and contribution in Australasia and Oceania. He is known both nationally and internationally as the 'go-to person' in Australian Wesleyan and Methodist studies and has published widely on many of the leading figures in these movements. He has served as a Research Fellow with the Australian Centre for Wesleyan Studies and edited the journal *Aldersgate Papers* over a sustained period. His most recent book, *John Wesley's Political World*, his third contribution to the 'Routledge Methodist Studies Series', has been acclaimed internationally.

Book review

**Glen O'Brien, *John Wesley's Political World*,
Routledge Methodist Studies Series, London 2022**

Graeme Davison

In 2001 the British Broadcasting Corporation asked its listeners to nominate the greatest Briton of all time. It later released a chart of the top 100. There are no prizes for guessing who came top of the poll—Second World War Prime Minister Winston Churchill—nor would the appearance of Darwin, Shakespeare, Newton and Elizabeth the First in the top ten cause much surprise. Exactly halfway down the list, at number 50, was the evangelist and founder of Methodism, John Wesley. Methodists might have felt he deserved a higher place than Paul McCartney (19), David Bowie (29), and even Boy George (46), but others might marvel that in a now very secular Britain, Wesley made the list at all. Other important religious figures such as William Wycliffe, John Bunyan, George Fox, John Henry Newman, John Milton and John Knox did not make the top 100 at all.

If a similar poll had been taken a century ago would probably have polled higher than number 50. In Australia, too, his name was much better known than today. In 1934, Victoria's centenary year, Chief Justice Sir John Latham unveiled the bronze statue of John Wesley that stands outside Wesley Church Lonsdale Street. The Methodist businessman and philanthropist Fred Cato and his son Alec had commissioned the sculptor Paul Montfort to execute the figure of the famous preacher, not on horseback—an equestrian statue might have exceeded the Cato's budget—but, Bible in hand, and in full preaching mode. "John Wesley had erected a far more enduring memorial to himself than any bronze could be", Latham declared. "It was Wesley's influence which prevented in England an upheaval similar to the French Revolution which occurred at the end of his life". Latham, the former leader of the conservative National Party, had been born into a Methodist family but by 1934 was known to be a rationalist, so in praising Wesley's calming influence, he was giving secular support to a claim often proudly made by Methodists as well.

The most authoritative contemporary support for that claim came from the historian Elie Halévy, whose famous *History of the English People* had

been published in English ten years earlier in 1924. Looking across the channel from France, Halévy was impressed with "the extraordinary stability which English Society [enjoyed] throughout a period of revolutions and crises". The secret of England's immunity from turmoil lay in its religious culture and institutions, notably the moderating influence of Methodism among its middle and working classes. "Methodism", he famously declared, "was the antidote to Jacobinism". Other historians, some of Methodist parentage, rejected Halévy's claim that Methodism was a conservative influence. With its belief in freewill and its embrace of the poor and downtrodden, they believed that Methodism was a force for working class emancipation and political reform. They pointed to a long line of Methodist trade unionists and Labor political leaders, like Keir Hardie.

Whether Methodism was conservative or radical remained a lively issue in Australia, as well as in Britain. There have been sons of Australian Methodist households like Joseph Carruthers,

Uniting Church National History Society Newsletter

Contributions to this newsletter are welcome,
but please send them via email and in MS
Word or Apple Pages format only.

Editor: Robert Renton

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John Latham, Garfield Barwick, Earl Page and John Howard who leant to the political Right, and others such as Gil Duthie, Brian Howe, Evan Walker and Barry Jones, who leant to the Left. Both sides claimed inspiration from Wesley and their Methodist upbringing. Were they right or wrong?

Wesley's Political World is an important contribution to this debate. Professor Glen O'Brien takes us back its very roots in the political writings of Wesley himself. He comes to his task splendidly equipped, having published two previous books on the history of Australian Methodism; but the book is also a fresh departure, in taking him from the nineteenth and twentieth story of Australian Methodism to a period before the European settlement of Australia and the French and Industrial Revolutions. In reading Wesley's words, he must also immerse himself in Wesley's world, the pre-industrial, pre-revolutionary eighteenth century. While Wesley wrote extensively on political matters, he was not a political philosopher. "I am no politician; politics lie quite out of my province", he declared in 1768. Yet events, and the responsibilities of leadership, often compelled him to deliver advice and counsel to his followers, sometimes about matters on which, it must be admitted, he was less than expert. "No one as invested as Wesley in the leadership of such a growing movement [as the Methodists] could stay entirely politically neutral", O'Brien shrewdly observes. Politics was just one of the many non-religious subjects on which Wesley wrote. But it was a subject of particular sensitivity and, while attentive always to religious principle, Wesley was also keenly aware of the effects of his counsel for his followers and the movement he led.

Latham credited Wesley for saving England from revolution, but the revolution Wesley mainly sought to avoid was a repetition of the bloody conflict that had occurred only half a century before his birth, the Puritan Revolution of the mid-seventeenth century. When Wesley wrote his first political tracts in the mid 1740s the execution of Charles the First was still a lively memory in the minds of contemporaries. A Catholic Pretender to the English throne, Charles

Stuart, had only recently crossed the border and was marching towards London.

As a young student in Oxford, Wesley had friends among the Jacobites, as they called themselves, who yearned for the restoration of the Stuart monarchy and upheld the divine right of Kings.

Call for Papers

Conference Theme:

Truth telling:

From colonising to covenanting

This conference will have a focus on the history of the Uniting Church and its predecessors in Northern Australia. It coincides with the 100th anniversary of the commencement of the Methodist Mission at Milingimbi in Arnhem Land and the 150th anniversary of the commencement of the Darwin congregation of the now Uniting Church.

Papers to be presented at the conference can address the history of these two communities in the light of the theme or can address the theme more generally.

Presenters at the conference will have 20 minutes to speak on their topic with ten minutes for discussion to follow. Presentations can be in person or online. The papers will be published as a record of proceedings after the conference.

Please send paper proposals of no more than 300 words by 28 February 2023 to:

Rev Steve Orme,
Convenor of Organising Committee
Phone 0447 148 744
ucnhs2023conference@gmail.com

Todd of the Overland Telegraph Line

20 August 2022 marked the 150th anniversary of the completion of the monumental telegraph line between Adelaide and Darwin which connected Australia with Britain and thereby cut communications from months to hours. Accomplished in two years over country only traversed once before, the 2,000 mile long single wire was supported by 36,000 wooden poles.

The 'architect' of this historic feat was Charles Heavitt Todd (1826–1910), astronomer, meteorologist, telegraph and telephone engineer and a foundation member of Stow Memorial Church, now Pilgrim Uniting Church in Adelaide. Todd was appointed Government Astronomer and Superintendent of Telegraphs in 1855 and arrived in Port Adelaide in November with his young wife Alice.

Todd made an outstanding contribution to the life of the young colony of South Australia and the whole country. He was honoured with a knighthood and is recognised, with Alice, by two brass plaques on the east wall of Pilgrim Church. Alice's name is remembered in the town of Alice Springs (previously Stuart Springs) and their surname in the river running through it. Todd died on 29 January 1910 and was buried at North Road Cemetery (Nailsworth, South Australia).

Source: *S.A.'s Greats: The Men and Women of the North Terrace Plaques*, Ed. John Healey, 2002. Originally contributed by Pilgrim UC Heritage, History and Archival Committee, reproduced from *Uniting History SA*, September 2022.

Note from the Editor

I was reminded of this story while compiling this newsletter on a day when a major fault occurred in my local district and we had no internet or mobile phone connection for many hours. How quickly we can feel cut off from the wider world (even just the next suburbs) when our electronic systems fail, yet these modern communications have only been with us so recently!

Wesley's own parents had divided opinions on the matter. But by his middle years Wesley had accommodated himself to the Hanoverian monarchy and to the compact between King and Parliament embodied in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Was he simply tacking with the prevailing winds? Nobody could blame him if he did, for his priorities were spiritual rather than political. He was deeply aware of the vulnerability of his movement to any suggestion of disloyalty. So while he proudly defended the rights of the freeborn Englishman, he believed they derived, not from the consent of the governed, as the famous philosopher John Locke argued, but from the will of God expressed through the King and Parliament. In his own words, "he was one who believed God, not the people, to be origin of the civil power".

This was why he opposed the American colonists in their demand for independence. The young John Wesley had spent time in the American colonies and he retained a generally favourable view of America. He was at first sympathetic to the colonists' pleas for relief from onerous British taxation. When they claimed their independence from Britain, relying only on the sovereign will of the people, however, Wesley turned against them. Loyalty and liberty were the twin pillars of his political outlook, but loyalty seems often to have trumped liberty.

Personalities and a degree of pragmatism, as well as principles, also seem to have influenced his thinking. For example, his opposition to the self-proclaimed defender of the English people's liberties, John Wilkes, not just because he disagreed with his ideas but because he loathed Wilkes' profligate lifestyle. Personalities also mattered in a broader sense, for as O'Brien argues, it was the subject's personal attachment to the monarch, the quality of loyalty, not simply an abstract love of order, which defined his political outlook.

Yet, while Wesley was a Tory, and a loyal upholder of the Monarchy, he was by no means reactionary, and on one subject at least—the transatlantic slave trade—he was well in advance of his times. When it came to the issue of race, Enlightenment philosophers like David Hume often discriminated against blacks more cruelly than Christians. Glen tells us that well before he wrote his 1774 pamphlet *Thoughts on Slavery*, Wesley, unlike his fellow Methodist George Whitefield, had consistently opposed the slave trade. Interestingly, he based his opposition to slavery, not

on the Bible, but on an argument from natural law. “Liberty is the right of every human creature, as soon as he breathes the vital air. And no human law can deprive him of that right, which he derived from the law of nature. . . Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion!” That the American colonists, including many of the leaders of the American Revolution, like Jefferson and Washington, were also great slave-owners did nothing to commend their cause. Like Samuel Johnson, Wesley saw only hypocrisy in the “yelps of liberty” that came from the “drivers of Negroes”.

Wesley was an Oxford-educated man from a clerical family, but he was never rich, lived very frugally and spent much of his life among the poor. There is no doubting his devotion to the spiritual welfare of the poor, but it would be a mistake to expect of him the same attitudes to questions of wealth and poverty that we apply to political or religious leaders in our own day. He was a product of a more hierarchical society, in which rich and poor each had their place. The modern sciences of economics and sociology were in their infancy. His thinking was closer in some ways to the Middle Ages than to the twentieth century. His compassion for the poor was equalled by his disapproval for the luxury and waste of the rich. He appealed to the ancient moral ideal of a ‘just price’ rather than to the impersonal laws of the market. “Do you demand, do you receive, no more than the real value of what you sell?” he asks in one of his sermons. In this respect Wesley was possibly closer to the outlook of the ordinary people of his time than were the new apostles of the new science political economy. In a famous article on the “moral economy of the English crowd, Edward Thompson showed that it precisely when the poor believed that merchants charged too much for their goods, or failed to give a just wage for their labour, that social harmony was imperilled. Here, perhaps, was one of the ways in which Wesley’s teaching did align with Halevy’s thesis.

Wesley’s political legacy was not limited by the influence of his own political writings. Others inspired by his beliefs and confronting the challenges of a different era, would sometimes arrive at different political conclusions from his. “Methodism”, O’Brien writes, “was the religion of the first person personal pronoun, with a stress on

personal agency that provided an avenue of individual choice, which would lead in the nineteenth century to a wider participation of the ordinary person in the social sphere.” His stress on individual choice might seem to align him with the John Howards and John Lathams. Yet, in spite of his sometimes unsympathetic attitude towards the poor—such as his hardline attitude to smugglers—Wesley, O’Brien maintains, was “not satisfied with individual responsibility alone”. He favoured modest government intervention through taxation and trade policies to curb the greed of the rich and ameliorate the sufferings of the poor. The twin pillars of Wesley’s outlook—liberty and loyalty—remained in tension, both in his own life, and in the movement he founded.

“John Wesley”, he insists, “was not a politician or an economist or a military strategist. He was a priest and an evangelist, so that his political world ultimately existed as a subset of a world bounded by the cosmic drama of salvation”. In reminding us of the very different world in which Wesley thought about politics, and the primacy of his religious goals, *Wesley’s Political World* is a valuable corrective to the myth-making that often surrounds great religious and political figures. The aim is not so much to recall us to original truth—for Wesley’s political world is not ours—as to help us distinguish what is of enduring value from what was simply a prudent response to the needs of the time. John Wesley may no longer be a household word but, more than two centuries after his death his influence is still felt in unacknowledged ways. This fine book will enable another generation to recognise his genius and appraise his legacy.#

I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.

Don’t search for the answers which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps, then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answers.

Rainer Maria Rilke (1903)

Searching for Sister Grace

Dr Cheryl Griffin

On Easter Sunday, 9 April 1933, just weeks before my mother's 17th birthday, a woman named Sister Grace wrote in a firm, confident, educated hand in my mother's autograph book:

"Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
as the swift seasons roll
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length are free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting
sea." (Lowell) Oliver Wendell Holmes

In amongst the childish handwriting and superficial verse of my mother's contemporaries, this entry stood out. Its author was the American poet Oliver Wendell Holmes Senior and this is the final stanza of his poem "The Chambered Nautilus". He, like the Lowell (James Russell Lowell) mentioned here, was a member of a group of five poets known as the Fireside Poets, a group that included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, he of "Hiawatha" fame.

Looking back on it now, it seems appropriate that this should be one of the first entries in my mother's autograph book. The verse alludes to the growth and spiritual development of the human soul and suggests that this mysterious Sister Grace was somehow instrumental in my mother's spiritual development. Yet I knew nothing of her except the name she used—Sister Grace.

And so began my search for Sister Grace. It was to be a long search, and I don't think it's over yet. Along the way I have uncovered the stories of four Sister Graces, three active in Victoria and this one in Tasmania. I have identified most of their names in private life and have located photographs of three of them. But even though I have yet to find it, I know that there is much more to know—about them and about their vocation.

In a paper entitled "The Forgotten Women", given at the 2019 UCA National Historical

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New Board members are Ken Barelli who is the current chairperson of the managing committee of the UC Historical Society for the Victorian and Tasmanian Synod. He is completing a PhD on Methodist history in Victoria.

Damian Palmer is a sessional lecturer in Church History at United Theological College, North Parramatta, NSW, and his current research interests are in the history and theology of the Uniting Church.

An encouragement to contribute

This newsletter is open for contributions from all members of the Society and beyond. It is not an academic journal. Some material is submitted by professional historians, but other, equally interesting and valuable material is submitted by people who have a story to tell. Modern historiography recognises that there are many sources of historical information, including Indigenous history which can be in a unique form that requires a different set of parameters of understanding and appreciation.

In a recent book by Anna Clark (*Making Australian History*), she says that "history is something we do, as well as something that *happened*. The porousness and changeability of those boundaries is critical.... Methodologies and platforms such as oral history, memory studies and historical fiction have presented radical challenges to traditional disciplinary strictures built on 'fact' and 'truth'".

Have you got a story to tell? If so, don't hesitate too long over deciding to send your story to the Editor, robert.renton@bigpond.com or on paper to 15 Buffalo Crescent, Manor Lakes, Vic. 3024.

Society Conference, Alison Head spoke about women in the Church during the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of those women were members of the Sisterhood—Sisters of the People—a group that was established in Melbourne in 1893 at the height of the 1890s Depression. The Sisterhood was established under the auspices of Wesley Central Mission, but to complicate matters, ‘Sister’ was the title given to any woman who worked in various missions under the Home Mission Committee, so the Sister Graces presented here could—and did—work in places other than the centre of Melbourne.

These virtually anonymous four Sisters are some of Alison’s “forgotten women”. They were all known as Sister Grace. They all made enormously valuable contributions to the outreach of the church in their day. But who was who?

One, whose name in private life I’ve yet to discover, was a travelling preacher and evangelist who drew huge crowds on her tours of northern Tasmania and Victoria and was attached to the Richmond Mission. One, a widow named Margaret Bean and the only Sister Grace not attached to a Methodist Church, worked in central Melbourne among the destitute. Another, Sister Grace Dennis, worked out of the Auburn Methodist Church, and the last Sister Grace, Grace Bennell, the one who wrote in my mother’s autograph book, also worked out of one church—the Paterson Street Methodist Church in Launceston.

...

This is the story of how I unravelled the individual stories of these four women. It’s the story of how I discovered their ‘private names’ and pieced together the work they did as church sisters.

The tradition of women travelling preachers in Victoria stretches back to pre-goldrush days and Martha Ride, wife of Primitive Methodist clergyman the Rev. John Ride. She had been a travelling preacher in England since 1822, predating her 1825 marriage. Here in Victoria, she continued to preach once the couple arrived in the colony in 1849.

The tradition of women church workers also stretches back a long way, but the group under consideration here, known as the Sisterhood and

based on the British Sisters of the Poor, emerged out of the 1890s Depression.

What they did varied. In his 1918 history of the Central Mission, A.J. Derrick describes the Sisters’ role as one of support to ministers in the form of welfare and organisational oversight. He stated that they led classes and Bible Study groups and took part in public speaking and preaching. He

2023 Conference Update

Organising is continuing for the next National Conference of the Society to be held in Darwin from Thursday evening 24th August to Sunday 27th August 2023 with the theme: *Truth Telling: From Colonising to Covenanting*

A Call for papers has been sent out and expressions of interest are coming in with a broad range of responses. Those wanting to present have until the end of February 2023 to submit their proposals.

The conference opens on Thursday evening with a meal for conference attendees, followed by a welcome to Larrakia country and keynote address by Yingiya Mark Guyula MLA, member for the Northern Territory seat of Mulka covering East Arnhem Land.

Friday will be held in Darwin city with a planned visit to the Chinese Museum at the Chung Wah Society and a presentation on the ministry with the Chinese over 150 years. Friday night will be a free night for people to enjoy the activities around the Darwin Festival happening at the time.

Saturday will be a day of stories and celebration at Nungalinga College focussing on the 100th anniversary of the commencement of the Methodist Mission on Milingimbi. 2023 is also the 50th anniversary year for Nungalinga College.

Sunday will be a worship service at the Darwin Memorial Uniting Church celebrating 150 years since the commencement of the worship, witness and service of the congregation. It began as a Wesleyan Methodist congregation supported from South Australia. The UCA President, the Rev. Sharon Hollis, will be the Guest Preacher.

Details on registration will be available in the New Year.

also noted that at the time of Union in 1902, the Methodist Church had 30,000 members in Victoria and Tasmania, 1,507 local preachers and "some Bible Women and Sisters of the People".

The vagueness of this reference intensifies the anonymising of these hardworking women who were known in their public lives simply as Sister Grace, Sister Faith, Sister Ruth and so on. These were often not their given names in private life, but the names they chose for their public role, thus adding to their anonymity. To add to this, they wore uniforms, black (grey in summer), with a grey veil, with variations as the years went on. Renate Howe and Shurlee Swain remind us in their centenary history of the Wesley Central Mission that the Sisterhood was based on an English model—vocation but no vow, discipline but not servility, association but no limit to freedom. "Wesleyan Sisterhoods", they wrote, "clearly were to be free of all taint of Roman Catholicism, yet offer an effective way of enlisting women to God's service."

At the UCA's National Historical Society Conference in 2019, historian Graeme Davison quoted American novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson. Robinson, he said, is "fascinated by history" and "especially by erasures and omissions which seem to be strongly present in their apparent absence, like black holes, pulling the fabric of collective narrative out of shape".

With this in mind, here is a small scale telling of a narrative of religious life in Australia that addresses one of those 'black holes'—the story of four ordinary women's public lives, women who otherwise might have been confined to the traditional and restricted domestic sphere. None of these women were moneyed, politically or socially powerful, members of the elite, but they made a difference in the lives they touched and in so doing changed the course of countless individual life stories.

These are quiet lives, "quiet whispers", as Davison calls them, but they speak to a significant (and almost absent) part of today's historical landscape. Davison asked at the 2019 Conference "What is the point of writing religious history in today's secular age?" My answer is right here in these four stories that exemplify the place of service, compassion and belief. And remind us all that it is not 'all about me'.

The unravelling of these stories was a complex task. Confusions abound, not least because of the practice of referring to Sister Grace, Brother Thomas and so on when masonic lodge meetings were reported in the press. Adding to the confusion is the convention of using the terms 'Brother' and 'Sister' in old Methodist circles, the terminology surviving into post-Union days but petering out in the 1980s.

...

And so to the four Sister Graces who are the subject of this paper.

The first Sister Grace is the woman who wrote in my mother's diary. She was the youngest of the four women, born in 1874. Her contribution was



Sister Grace Bennell

confined to her home town of Launceston where she worked as a church sister from 1924 until her death in 1944 aged 70. She was 50 when she began her work and what she did before that is not known, although the 1919 electoral roll indicates

that she was then working as a governess.

This Sister Grace's background was genteel. She came from a well-off middle class family of prominent business people, and was educated at Launceston Ladies College, after which she completed art training at the Technical College and was successful at the South Kensington Art School (now part of the Royal College of Art) examinations, so she must have been an accomplished amateur artist. Her parents both died in the first decade of the twentieth century and she continued to live in the family home. Little more is known about her life until she became a Sister in 1924 and began delivering weekly scripture instruction at Wellington Square Practising School, the school that my mother attended in 1928. She was attached to the Paterson Street Methodist Church, the church my mother attended and where she (my mother) taught Sunday School.

Reports of Sister Grace's "indefatigable service" and "faithful pastoral work" suggest a sincere but

uninspired contribution. Certainly it was confined to the school and the Paterson Street Church and apart from a few references in the local newspaper, she is virtually anonymous in the larger life of the church. Yet, her choice of verse for my mother's autograph book speaks to a deeper intellectual life and it may be fanciful, but I like to think that my mother found inspiration from this much older woman who shared her given name and her faith for almost a decade during the years when she grew to womanhood.

It is only through happenstance that I know as much as I do about Grace Bennell. In the strange way of these things, it turns out that she was the aunt of lifelong close friends of my parents and related by marriage to my mother's sister. However, the family members I've spoken to know little about her and there is no way now of knowing whether my mother, also Grace, and this Sister Grace knew of that connection at any stage before Grace Bennell's death in 1944. She is buried, by the way, in a very impressive multi-generational family grave at Launceston's Carr Villa Cemetery.

We do know that Grace Bennell's faithful service to the church continued after her death. She left £25 (about \$1700 today) to be invested in Tasmania by the Treasurers of the Tasmania Methodist Mission Capital Fund to be paid to the Superintendent Minister of the Methodist Church, Paterson Street, Launceston and thence to be paid to the Tasmania Methodist Home Missionary Fund as part of the Paterson Street Church's annual subscription to the fund. She also left £25 in a similar fashion to the Methodist Overseas Mission Society.

My mother, now with a 6 year old and a baby, had been living with her parents in Launceston since early 1943, while my father served in the RAAF. However, by the time Grace Bennell died in January 1944, she had returned to Victoria, to the outer eastern suburb of Boronia, so she would not have attended the funeral and there is no way of knowing whether she even knew of Grace Bennell's death at this time.

...

The second Sister Grace was not a Methodist and she was the only one of the four Graces who married and was a mother. Margaret Bean was a 50 year old Scottish widow when she arrived in



Margaret Bean

Australia with her adult son Albert, a Baptist minister, in 1903. She began working in Melbourne's slums in 1911. An advocate for the poor, she began her work at the Baptist Gospel Hall, then when it closed, established Sister Grace's Mission for the Friendless and Fallen, a non-denominational organisation that amalgamated with Melbourne City Mission in 1920. Active between 1911 and 1929 (that is between the ages of 60 to her late 70s), she was older than the other women featured here and worked longer and to a much older age than they did. She was different, too, because she had been married and had a child. Although there is a Baptist connection, her work with 'fallen women' was non-denominational. In electoral rolls, she described herself variously as a sister, a missionary and a superintendent. She died in 1940 aged 86 and was buried at Box Hill Cemetery.

...



Sister Grace, the travelling preacher

The third Sister Grace is the woman I know the most about, at least the most about her life as a travelling preacher and evangelist. Newspaper reports recount, in glowing terms, her various tours of Victoria and northern Tasmania. There is a photograph of her (at least I think it's her) when she was attached to the Richmond Mission, but so far I have not been able to discover her name in private life. Was Grace an adopted name? What was her surname? I'm no closer now than I was when I started out. Although I did find one article that suggested her surname was Geffrey, so far I have not been able to verify this, despite employing every technique I could think of to winkle out the basic facts of her life.

The first mention of this Sister Grace, in 1899, refers to her as "about middle age", so she was

probably born in the 1850s. She was attached to the Central Methodist Mission and was “one of the chief helpers” in the Forward Movement, we are told. From the available newspaper coverage, she appears to have been active from 1899 until 1903, and maybe longer. She undertook various tours of Victoria between 1899 and 1901 and was in northern Tasmania in 1902 and 1903. She was attached to the Richmond Mission in 1903/04 and a Jubilee history of that time, where I found her photograph, is the last reference I have found to her.

This Sister Grace met with enthusiasm wherever she went. As a travelling preacher, she was “engaged” by different circuits for lengthy periods, sometimes for special events, for example, an anniversary at Broadford where her sermon was on Peace. She took as her text John 14, verses 1-2 “Let not your hearts be troubled, ye who believe in God, believe also in me. In my father’s house are many mansions. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.” She then sang the hymn “Not I but Christ”, accompanying herself on the autoharp and gave moving descriptions of her work in Richmond and her rescue work. Large crowds came out and enthusiastic newspaper reports showed that there was exhortation, comfort, celebration and evidence of conversion in her presentations, She was a great deliverer of her message—dramatic and earnest. A mesmerising storyteller. She used her musical skills to great effect. No doubt there was also a novelty factor as she toured small country towns. Styled as a noted lecturess and gospel singer, we are told she had the “gift of voice” and that the “charm and pathos” of her singing “stirred the heart to its very depth”. Her sermons were also praised—“Sister Grace has a winning, convincing, and simple method of presenting gospel truth”. In 1902, in Tasmania, . After 1903 there are no more references to this “lady evangelist”. I did find a 1911 reference to a Sister of the People called Sister Grace who worked among women, but so far I have not been able to take this further.

...

The fourth Sister Grace emerged from the TROVE newspaper collection as I made one last desperate attempt at finding the surname of Sister Grace, the travelling preacher. She was Sister Grace Dennis, and like Grace Bennell of

Launceston, she worked in one place – the Melbourne suburb of Auburn. There is little that can be told about her life as a Sister, apart from the fact that she led the ladies Bible Class, the Ladies Club and the Senior Christian Endeavour Society at Auburn. She was born in Ballarat in 1862 and worked as a tailoress in Ballarat until at least 1914. Three years later she was working as a Church Sister and worked at that vocation until her unexpected death in 1921 aged 57. Like Margaret Bean, our second Sister Grace, she is buried at Box Hill Cemetery.

Although I can tell you little of her life as a Church Sister, a very interesting story has emerged about the difficulties of Christian witness in a case of what amounts to religious persecution of a group of Salvation Army officers at Ballarat in 1892. One of those officers was Grace Dennis’s brother Charles, who was newly arrived from Bathurst, New South Wales. In February 1892, Charles Dennis and a group of men and women were arrested for street marching on a Sunday. They were sent to Ballarat Gaol for contravening city bylaws. They were gaoled, put in prison garb and kept in separate cells with one hour’s exercise daily.

When that incident took place, Grace Dennis was in Ballarat working as a tailoress. By the time she was working at Auburn (during the World War One years and beyond), her brother Charles was a Salvation Army officer based at Coburg. He died a few months after she did, aged 69 and was buried at Coburg Cemetery.

...

It is impossible to know the motivations of these four Graces as they chose the path of Sisterhood. It is impossible to know more about their interior lives, given that there are no known letters, personal papers, diaries to consult. It is not always possible to know what they did in their daily lives as Sisters. And in one case, it is not even possible to put a private name to the person.

What it is possible to know is that this was a vocation that drove these four women, who made little money but found richness in their calling.

The Sisterhood, begun in Melbourne in 1893, was never a huge movement in terms of numbers and was overtaken by the Order of Deaconesses, established in 1942. It ended finally in 1968 after decades of dwindling numbers. The Sisters

worked for very little more than their keep and in the early days stepped out of traditional roles and broke boundaries. In the end, though, they were an anachronism and quickly faded out of public consciousness.

These stories draw attention once more to a mode of witness that has gone, but which made a small but important contribution in its time.

It is my aim to uncover more stories of the 'forgotten women' of the Uniting Church and bring them back into history. Women lay preachers, Sisters of the People, Deaconesses and others all deserve a place in the Church's history. As Marilynne Robinson asserts, they should not be absent "like black holes, pulling the fabric of collective narrative out of shape".

Dr Cheryl Griffin is an historian, a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria and a member of the Uniting Church Historical Society of Victoria and Tasmania Managing Committee. She presented this paper to a Zoom audience of UCHS members in 2021 and it was subsequently published in the *Proceedings of the Uniting Church Historical Society, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania*, Volume 28, No. 3, December 2021.



Robert Owen Evans, OAM, M.A.

20 February 1937 - 8 November 2022

Tribute by Malcolm Prentis who succeeded Bob Evans as President of the Uniting Church Historical Society NSW/ACT, of which he was a member for its entire life from 1977 to 2019, Vice-President from 1980 to 2018 and editor of *Church Heritage* from 1993 to 2019.

Tribute to Bob Evans

The Rev. Bob Evans has gone to be with his Lord after a lifetime of service in ministry, church history and astronomy. He was a disciple of humble, cheerful, eirenic nature, dedicated to revival. He was a long-time member and supporter of the EHA.

Bob Evans was born in Concord West, Sydney. His father was a botanist and Scout leader who introduced him to astronomy when he was in primary school. He began his journey of faith in the Strict and Particular Baptist church, later joining the Methodist church. The family moved to Eastwood in the early 1950s. Bob left School in 1954 and he spent 1959 preparing to enter theological college. Bob ministered first in the Granville circuit in 1960, then studied at the Methodist Leigh Theological College at Enfield and the University of Sydney between 1961 and 1965. He graduated B.A. from the University of Sydney in 1965, majoring in Philosophy and Modern History. He served as a minister until his retirement in 1998, in the Uniting Church from 1977. While a student in 1964, he married Elaine; they had four daughters.

Bob was appointed by the New South Wales Methodist Conference as a probationer to Parramatta North circuit in 1966 and was ordained by Conference 1967. He was moved to Boolaroo 1969–71 and the Joint Parish of Boolaroo-Speers Point in 1972; and then to Leeton 1973–76. Following church union in 1977, he became a minister of the Uniting Church and served at Maclean 1977-84, Lower Blue Mountains 1985–93 and Coonabarabran 1993–97, before his retirement in 1998. He and Elaine then moved to Hazelbrook.

Bob amassed probably the largest personal library of the history of revival in the world. He himself published fifteen books on the subject himself, always anchored firmly in his diligent research in the primary sources. In an observation which might incidentally reflect Bob's mixed denominational background, Stuart Piggin opined in 2006 that

Robert Evans has become Australia's J. Edwin Orr in at least two respects: he is becoming as prolific in his output, and he adopts Orr's mediating position on revivals between the Edwardian Calvinists on the one hand and the Arminian Finneyites on the other.

He added that *Fire from Heaven* (2005) was acclaimed by Richard Dupuis, the Charles Finney

authority, as “the most important book about American revivals to appear in recent years”. In 2008, Bob obtained his M.A. at Macquarie University under Stuart’s supervision, with a thesis on evangelism in Australia and New Zealand in the late nineteenth century, focussing on evangelists Emilia Baeyertz and Thomas Cook. Bob’s works often quote the documents at length and are a great resource for other historians and, indeed, all those interested in revival. More than his interpretations, this was his most lasting historiographical achievement.

The Rev. Robert Evans was elected President of the Uniting Church Records and Historical Society (UCRHS) in 2005. He was a calming influence in a difficult situation in the management of the Archives predating his election and extending into 2008. Under a new constitution, approved by Synod in May 2010, the Society’s archival and historical society functions were split, having the Archives managed by a Synod agency and the UCRHS became simply the Uniting Church Historical Society NSW/ACT. Bob brought the Society through the transition with grace and efficiency, including expressing its more defined mission by organising more public lectures. In 2018, when ill health caused him to step down, his shoes were hard to fill. The Executive appointed him to an emeritus role and rejoiced in his recovery. Furthermore, between 2010 and 2019, Bob contributed eighteen articles (often previews of parts of his books) and six book reviews to *Church Heritage*.

Bob Evans was also a noted amateur astronomer, widely known for his visual discoveries of at least 42 supernovae in other galaxies, mostly using “backyard” telescopes, making him the most successful amateur supernova-hunter in the world.

Typically, he encouraged other amateurs to be involved in this area of observational astronomy.

His discoveries played a role in recent major advances in cosmology wherein professional astronomers developed measured estimates of the age, history and destiny of the universe, arising

from studies of supernovae. He was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia in 1988 for contributions to science, the Centenary Medal of the *Société Astronomique de France*, and honorary membership of the Royal Astronomical Society of Canada. He was a member of the International Astronomical Union and the Astronomical Society of Australia. The tribute in *Australian Sky & Telescope* noted that “One of Bob’s guiding principles was to be of service, and he made it contagious; he had the knack of motivating people to do things in such a way as to leave everyone better off.”

Astronomical work was integral to Bob’s working to the glory of God. In his 1993 book, *An Evangelical World-View Philosophy*, he “tried to set out the foundations of this unified view of human knowledge, as best I could”. In an interview 2004: he said,

when a person can recognise nature as part of God’s creation, which shows His wisdom, beauty, and power, then I find that it becomes a great way in which the glory of God is displayed. This is true whether we look at big things, or very small things. My father used to see this in the botanical world. I can see it in stars and galaxies, and in the depths of the universe.

Bob featured in Bill Bryson’s *A Short History of Nearly Everything* (2003).

Evans’s is a talent so exceptional that Oliver Sacks, in *An Anthropologist on Mars*, devotes a passage to him in a chapter on autistic savants — quickly adding that “there is no suggestion that he is autistic”. Evans, who had not met Sacks, laughs at the suggestion that he might be either autistic or a savant, but he was powerless to explain quite where his talent comes from.

Bryson was half right. Bob was a modest man who was absolutely clear that the talents he had were entirely gifts from God. And he was one of God’s gifts to us.#

**A REMINDER... 2023 SUBSCRIPTIONS ARE NOW DUE — \$25:
You can pay directly at Westpac BSB 032-828 Account 301985 or
by sending a cheque to 28 Bindaree Court, Mernda, Vic. 3754
(INCLUDE YOUR NAME PLEASE)**

AN INVITATION...

The Uniting Church Historical Society of Victoria and Tasmania invites you to join our 2023 programs via Zoom or in person, if you happen to live in Victoria.

Sunday 19 March: 2pm “Life after Politics”

The final presentation of the three-part series by the Rev. Brian Howe, this covering his years after politics. You may think that Brian has been in quiet retirement after his political career but not so.

He’s been actively involved in many and varied projects. This will be held at the Centre for Theology and Ministry, 29 College Crescent, Parkville. The session will be also broadcast on Zoom for those who cannot attend in person.

Sunday 4 June: 2pm “Hymns of the Nineteenth Century”

Rev Dr D’Arcy Wood will follow-up his remarkably popular session earlier this year and present hymns from the golden age of hymnody. This event includes your participation and you are encouraged to join the singing – hymn books provided. This will be held in the Stonnington Community Church, 59 Burke Road, East Malvern and will also be broadcast by Zoom.

Sunday 6 August: 2pm “Victorian Methodism”

Professor Graeme Davison will talk about his most recent book which explores more of his family history and its close involvement in Methodism. This is a follow-on to his book ‘Lost Relations’ and explores the other side of his family. This will be held in St John’s Uniting Church, cnr Buckley Street and Mount Alexander Road, Essendon and will also be broadcast by Zoom.

Tuesday 19 September: 10am Church tour in Geelong

Led by Geoff Paterson (RSVP is essential — 0447 320 398). The three churches being visited are Christ Church (Anglican); St Mary’s Roman Catholic; Wesley Uniting Church. More details will be available later but please plan a BYO lunch with beverages provided. Transport will be available from Geelong Station.

You will need to contact Robert Renton to receive the login details.

Robert Renton (robert.renton@bigpond.com).

A FREE GIFT...

Members of the National Society who are on email will receive a free PDF copy of the *Proceedings of the Uniting Church Historical Society Synod of Victoria and Tasmania for December 2022* from the Vic/Tas Society.

This edition includes:

- Life in politics 1977–1996 (Brian Howe)
- The Cato Lecture: its origins, intentions and speakers (Robert Gribben)
- Sandon Primitive/Methodist Church (Ken James)
- An early lesson in justice (Rosie Bray)
- A personal history of the United Faculty of Theology, Melbourne (Bruce Barber)
- How the church’s songs shaped us (D’Arcy Wood)
- The Moravians and their links with John Wesley and the early Methodist church (Tim Gatehouse)
- ‘She lived and loved to serve the kingdom, until death came swiftly from the air’: the story of Edna Lenna Button, 1901–1940 (Cheryl Griffin)

and a list of the publications of the Uniting Church Historical Society, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania.

These Proceedings are published twice a year in June and December.

Members of the National Society who are not on email may elect to receive a copy of future editions of these Proceedings by payment of \$15 per copy to the Vic/Tas Society. Direct deposit to CBA BSB 063-194 (don’t forget to include your name) or by cheque to Mr K. Barelli, 30 Campbell Road, Portsea, Vic. 3944. Please include a covering note re request, name and address.

Does anyone know or how to contact the following subscribers? We have received their payment—but not their contact details!

- Linda Terbutt
- Juleen Willis
- Andrew Watts
- Naomi Wolfe

Please let robert.renton@bigpond.com know or call 0427 812 606. Thanks!