

A Church on Every Hill

Religion in Brisbane in the 1950s

by David Hilliard

The religious culture of Brisbane in the post-war years had characteristics which distinguished it from other Australian capital cities.¹ Each of the four main branches of British Christianity — Anglican, Roman Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist — coexisted in a position of some strength, which almost exactly mirrored the national average. In Sydney, Hobart and Perth, by contrast, the Church of England was, in nominal adherents, by far the largest religious body. In Adelaide the proportion of Methodists was much higher and the proportions of Roman Catholics and Presbyterians were lower than elsewhere. The pattern of religious adherence in Brisbane did not differ significantly from most other regions in Queensland. The adherents of the major denominations, with the exception of the Lutherans, were urbanised in approximately the same proportion as the state's total population (Table 1). After the Second World War Brisbane received a much smaller number of migrants from Europe than other Australian capital cities and the proportion of overseas-born people in the city's population was much lower than the national average. Its growth was mainly a result of natural increase and the inward migration of Australian-born people from rural Queensland and other parts of Australia.² It was a culturally homogeneous environment which favoured religious stability, in which religious bodies retained their traditional ethos and predominant social composition. The shape of organised religion in Brisbane in the 1950s and early 1960s had altered very little since the 1890s.

Unlike Adelaide, Brisbane made no particular claim to being a 'city of churches', but it provided a hospitable atmosphere for churches and religious organisations. In the 1950s it was a slightly shabby city of wooden houses, dusty streets and unsewered suburbs which sprawled across hills and lowlands, divided by the meandering Brisbane River. Until the building boom that began in the 1960s 'the Story Bridge ranked with the City Hall tower as a symbol of the city'.³ Brisbane's ecclesiastical buildings were striking features of the city's landscape, and there were few hills or ridges in the metropolitan area that were not surmounted by a church or religious institution. On the edge of the city business district, overlooking

Spring Hill, was St Paul's Presbyterian Church, with its elegant spire. There were some striking Anglican churches, such as the white Romanesque church of the Holy Trinity at Woolloongabba, and the uncompleted cathedral of St John the Evangelist, in French Gothic style, designed by the great Late Victorian English architect, J.L. Pearson.

By far the greatest number of Brisbane's hilltop religious buildings were Roman Catholic: churches, schools, convents and monasteries. To Catholics this visibility was a source of enormous pride. 'It is impossible', observed the editor of the *Catholic Leader* in 1955, 'to go any distance in city or suburbs without the eye catching one of

Table 1
Religion and Urbanisation in Queensland, 1954

Number of adherents of principal religious denominations resident in Brisbane metropolitan area, the percentage of the metropolitan population and the percentage of total Queensland adherents resident in Brisbane

Denomination	Adherents in Brisbane	Proportion of pop'n of metropolitan area 1954	Percentage of total Qld adherents resident in Brisbane
Church of England	172430	34.33	38
Catholic	122304	24.35	39
Presbyterian	53933	10.74	36
Methodist	53101	10.57	36
Baptist	9335	1.86	46
Lutheran	5072	1.01	18
Orthodox	4970	0.99	59
Congregational	3670	0.73	40
Salvation Army	2516	0.50	35
Churches of Christ	2433	0.48	36
Brethren	2017	0.40	49
Seventh-day Adventist	1367	0.27	32
Other Christian	10554	2.10	41
TOTAL CHRISTIAN	443702	88.33	37
Hebrew	1075	0.21	80
Other Non-Christian	276	0.05	26
Total Non-Christian	1351	0.26	56
Indefinite	719	0.14	30
No religion	1823	0.36	48
No reply	54725	10.89	43
Total population	502320	100.00	38

Source: Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1954.

those glorious sites for the acquiring of which the Catholic Church is now famous.⁴ Notable examples included Corpus Christi Church at Nundah, built in the style of a Roman basilica, with a great copper-sheathed dome; the Church of Our Lady of Victories, in Spanish Mission style at Bowen Hills; and the massive brick church of St Brigid at Red Hill, built by Robin Dods in 1912-14 and modelled on Albi Cathedral in southern France, which was regarded by many as the 'finest ecclesiastical building' in Brisbane.⁵

DENOMINATIONAL STRUCTURE

At each census almost 90 per cent of the people of Brisbane identified themselves as adherents of one of the branches of Christianity.⁶ Only 1800 people — men outnumbering women by more than two to one — explicitly stated in 1954 that they had no religious belief, about one in three hundred of the city's total population. The highest concentration of non-believers was in the inner city. Brisbane's most prominent unbeliever was J.V. Duhig, former Professor of Pathology at the University of Queensland and a nephew of the Roman Catholic archbishop. A leading figure in the Rationalist Association of Queensland, he revelled in attacking religious obscurantism and the 'socially pernicious' morality of Christianity.

Four-fifths of the inhabitants of Brisbane described themselves as adherents of one of the four main denominations. The proportion declined slightly in the 1950s to 77 per cent in 1961. The changes in Australian religious affiliations and behaviour that were to occur in the 1960s and 1970s were much greater than those which had occurred since the late nineteenth century. In retrospect, therefore, the 1950s can be seen as the final stage of a long period of religious stability, in Brisbane as in Australian society as a whole.

Brisbane's religious culture, although dominated by traditional expressions of British Christianity, was remarkably varied, for the metropolitan area contained churches and meeting places of many different sects and minority religious movements. There was a Jewish congregation, with a handsome Romanesque-style synagogue in Margaret Street; a Moslem community with a mosque at Holland Park; the New Jerusalem Church (Swedenborgians); Christian Brethren; Jehovah's Witnesses; Assemblies of God; Seventh-day Adventists; a Christian Science Society; the Liberal Catholic Church; the Society of Friends; Spiritualists; Christadelphians; Theosophists; and Greek and Russian Orthodox congregations. The Joyful News Mission, 'independent and undenominational', preached an old-fashioned evangelical gospel and did benevolent work among the poor, from its hall in Fortitude Valley. After the Second World War there were new arrivals. The United States-based Church of the Nazarene

organised its first congregation in Brisbane in 1947. Migrants from Europe founded parishes of the Ukrainian Orthodox, Serbian Orthodox, and other self-governing Orthodox churches and formed congregations of the (Dutch) Reformed Churches of Australia. The Mormons, who had begun work in Brisbane in 1890, became more familiar to the people of Brisbane when they launched a big missionary programme in the 1950s. Their new vigour was symbolised by a modern chapel in a prominent place on Kangaroo Point, opened in 1958.⁷

Each major religious denomination was a more or less self-contained system, with its own organisations for women, men and young people, its own Sunday schools, charitable institutions, hospital, theological college and central bureaucracy. Each had its own periodical, published in Brisbane, but usually serving the whole of Queensland. Methodists and Catholics produced weekly papers, the *Methodist Times* and the *Catholic Leader*; the other denominations had monthly journals.⁸

Outside these structures was a cluster of Brisbane-based organisations that crossed denominational boundaries — though not the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between Catholics and other Christians. The most influential was the Queensland Council of Churches, comprising representatives of the major non-Anglican Protestant churches, which sought to promote a ‘united witness’ on social and moral questions in Queensland ‘for the public good’, and organised public religious functions. In 1950 it inaugurated an annual Blessing of the Plough service at the Royal National Show and in 1959 a performance of ‘The Messiah’ on Palm Sunday. It was firmly Protestant in outlook, suspicious of Roman Catholicism and its behind-the-scenes influence in Queensland politics, and a vocal opponent of state aid to non-government schools. On the last Sunday in October every year, in conjunction with the United Protestant Association and the Loyal Orange Lodge, it held a Reformation Rally in the City Hall. There was also a group of distinctively Evangelical organisations, which brought together Evangelical Protestants from various denominations: the Queensland Bible Institute, the Queensland Evangelisation Society, the Queensland Temperance League, Open Air Campaigners, Youth for Christ, the Scripture Union, the Christian Endeavour Union and the Inter-Varsity Fellowship.⁹

During the 1950s another organ for interdenominational cooperation was established — the Queensland State Committee of the Australian Committee for the World Council of Churches (now the Queensland Ecumenical Council of Churches). Unlike the Queensland Council of Churches, it received official support from the Church of England. Its inaugural meeting, in 1947, was held at

'Bishopsbourne', the official residence of the Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane, and the president until 1956 was Archbishop Reginald Halse. During the 1950s relations between the two interchurch councils were friendly enough. Several of Brisbane's leading ministers, such as the Rev. George Nash, were prominent in both, and in 1957 a representative conference agreed on their separate spheres of activity.

Through the State Committee of the World Council of Churches, the word 'ecumenical' was introduced into the vocabulary of Queensland Christians. In November 1952, following an international Faith and Order Conference at Lund in Sweden, the Committee held the state's first 'ecumenical conference of ministers of religion' — 'Little Lund' — at St Francis' College in Brisbane. Thirty priests, pastors and ministers of eight denominations (including a Roman Catholic priest) met for two days of theological discussion, on the nature of the church, inter-communion and ways of worship. 'Denominational differences were clearly expressed, often with considerable humour', reported the secretary of the meeting: 'It is no exaggeration to say that the increasing knowledge brought heightened respect for one another.'¹⁰ In 1954, the Rev. G. Lindsay Lockley, Principal of Cromwell College, the new Congregational college at the University of Queensland, formed an interdenominational theological study group, with two representatives from each cooperating church. In May 1955 the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was observed in Brisbane for the first time. In the early 1960s, as the Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational churches negotiated nationally to form a united church, a joint committee was set up in Brisbane to encourage cooperation between the three denominations in new suburbs. The first joint parish was formed at West Chermside in 1962. Almost imperceptibly the religious atmosphere had begun to change.

ANGLICAN AND ROMAN CATHOLIC

Within the Brisbane metropolitan area the geographical distribution of adherents of the major religious groups differed quite markedly, often related to patterns of migration, the social status of particular suburbs, and existence of church-run educational institutions.¹¹

Slightly less than one-third of the people of Brisbane identified themselves as belonging to the Church of England. It had social prestige. In the prosperous suburbs of Ascot and Clayfield Anglicans numbered two-fifths of the population, and St Augustine's, Hamilton, was the wealthiest parish in Brisbane. Church of England Grammar School ('Churchie') in East Brisbane was one of the leading boys' schools of Queensland. But in nominal adherents Anglicans were a very diverse group, embracing people of every district, occupation and social class. Only in Darra, where the percentage of European migrants

was unusually high, did they comprise less than 30 per cent of inhabitants.

The identity of the Church of England in Brisbane was based on the belief that it was the national church of the English people, the ancient Catholic Church of England, purified but not destroyed at the Reformation. For several years in the early 1950s the diocesan paper ran a series of front-page articles on the cathedrals of England, and in 1954 the diocesan synod passed a resolution deploring 'the widespread misapprehension that the Church of England was founded by King Henry VIII'.¹² In doctrine and in belief, however, Anglicans were not homogeneous. Most of the clergy, as elsewhere in Queensland, were Anglo-Catholic, but some lay Anglicans were sympathetic to an older, submerged, Low Church tradition. Tensions erupted in the mid-1950s. In synod there were complaints about the Anglo-Catholic doctrines and devotional practices taught to theological students at St Francis' College. In 1956 a group of Evangelical laymen launched a short-lived Church of England Defence Association, to oppose Anglo-Catholic rituals and forms of worship used at All Saints', Wickham Terrace, and some suburban churches, which they claimed to be 'serious breaches of church order, discipline and doctrine'.¹³

Linking the forty-seven parishes of the Church of England in Brisbane were a number of diocesan organisations with local branches: the Mothers' Union, the Church of England Men's Society, the Girls' Friendly Society, the Church of England Boys' Society, the Order of the Comrades of St George, and the Young Anglican Fellowship (introduced in 1958). These encouraged a strong sense of Anglican identity. However, the great majority of self-described Anglicans in Brisbane were not regular churchgoers and did not participate in church-based organisations.

For the core of 'keen churchpeople' the principal public demonstration of faith, ever since 1907, was an annual procession of witness on Good Friday evening, organised by the Church of England Men's Society. Every year some three or four thousand Anglicans, led by representatives of every parish and church organisation carrying embroidered banners, walked through the city streets to an open-air service in King George Square and the performance of a Passion Play in the City Hall.

Since 1943 the Anglicans of Brisbane had been led by Archbishop Halse.¹⁴ In the 1950s he was in his seventies; he never seriously considered retirement and died in office in August 1962, having been knighted at the beginning of that year. Halse had 'presence': at great liturgical functions he was the embodiment of the dignified patriarchal prelate with a rich and sonorous voice. He represented the Church of England in Australia at the Coronation in London in June 1953 and nine months later, during the royal tour of Australia, welcomed

the Queen to a service in his own cathedral on her first morning in Brisbane. As an administrator, he was old-fashioned. He did all his correspondence in his own hand, did no forward planning, and was reluctant to initiate action. After his death the preacher of the panegyric at his funeral service admitted that some had wished for more vigorous leadership. The editor of the diocesan paper referred to his 'masterly inactivity': 'problems allowed quietly to attain their true proportions usually resolved themselves without interference'.¹⁵ But Halse was no ecclesiastical reactionary. He allowed his younger subordinates to take initiatives. An Anglo-Catholic with broad sympathies, he was a firm supporter of the ecumenical movement at a time when many Anglican clergy in Queensland dismissed it as mere 'pan-Protestantism'.

The Roman Catholic Church, claiming the adherence of one-quarter of the population, was the second largest religious body in Brisbane, but it overshadowed the other churches in its number of regular worshippers — the huge crowds that flocked to Mass every Sunday — and in the size of its organisations and institutions. It was led by the Irish-born octogenarian James Duhig, who had been Archbishop of Brisbane since 1917.¹⁶

Duhig had sought the goals of social integration and religious harmony. In the latter he was assisted by the predominant Anglo-Catholicism of the Church of England, which emphasised a common Catholicism and discouraged the expression of anti-Romanism. By the 1950s Duhig had become a close friend of Archbishop Halse and the two church leaders often appeared together at public functions: 'They were growing old together, and the city became accustomed to seeing the two faces side by side — dignified, kindly, fraternal.'¹⁷

Catholics were strongest — more than 30 per cent of the total population — in the inner city and Fortitude Valley, the migrant suburb of Darra, and the northern working-class suburbs of Normanby and Red Hill. On the other hand, they were only one in seven of the population of St Lucia, and one in six of Wynnum and Indooroopilly. The bayside working-class suburb of Wynnum was one of the most Protestant areas of Brisbane.

Brisbane Catholicism had the appearance of a large and cohesive sub-culture. In 1960 in the metropolitan area there were eighty parish primary schools and colleges run by religious orders, with 27,000 pupils, and the Mater Misericordiae Hospital, conducted by the Sisters of Mercy, was one of the city's major hospitals. (Until 1956 it was the only public hospital south of the river.)¹⁸ Brisbane Catholics were linked by a strong network of organisations such as the Holy Name Society for men, the Catholic Daughters of Australia, the Children of Mary and Sacred Heart sodalities for women, the Christian Brothers Old Boys' Association, the Catholic Tennis Association and the various Catholic Action movements. In the 1950s a cluster of new

societies were formed for men in particular occupations: the Catholic Bank Officers' Guild of St Stephen, the Catholic Insurance Guild of St Therese, the Post Office Catholic Guild of St Augustine, the Railway Catholic Guild of St Christopher, and the Police Guild of St Michael, the president of which in the mid-1950s was the Commissioner of Police himself. Each week the *Catholic Leader* included a social page which reported on the weddings, interstate holidays, luncheons and fundraising activities of the women of Brisbane's leading Catholic families:

Quite the smartest and daintiest figure I met during the week was Mrs L.L. Quinn. Her lovely ensemble of Junior blue was eye-catching. With her were her two smartly groomed daughters, Mrs Kevin Ward and Mrs Marjorie McCoy.¹⁹

Archbishop Duhig had long been called 'James the Builder'. During the 1950s he opened sixteen new parishes in Brisbane. To augment the number of clergy he encouraged more religious orders to make foundations in the diocese — Dominicans, Oblates of Mary Immaculate and Passionists. For pastoral work among post-war European migrants, he introduced communities of Italian Capuchins from New York, Premonstratensians from Holland, Canossian Daughters of Charity from Italy and Polish Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, from the United States. He dedicated an immense number of new churches, convents and schools:

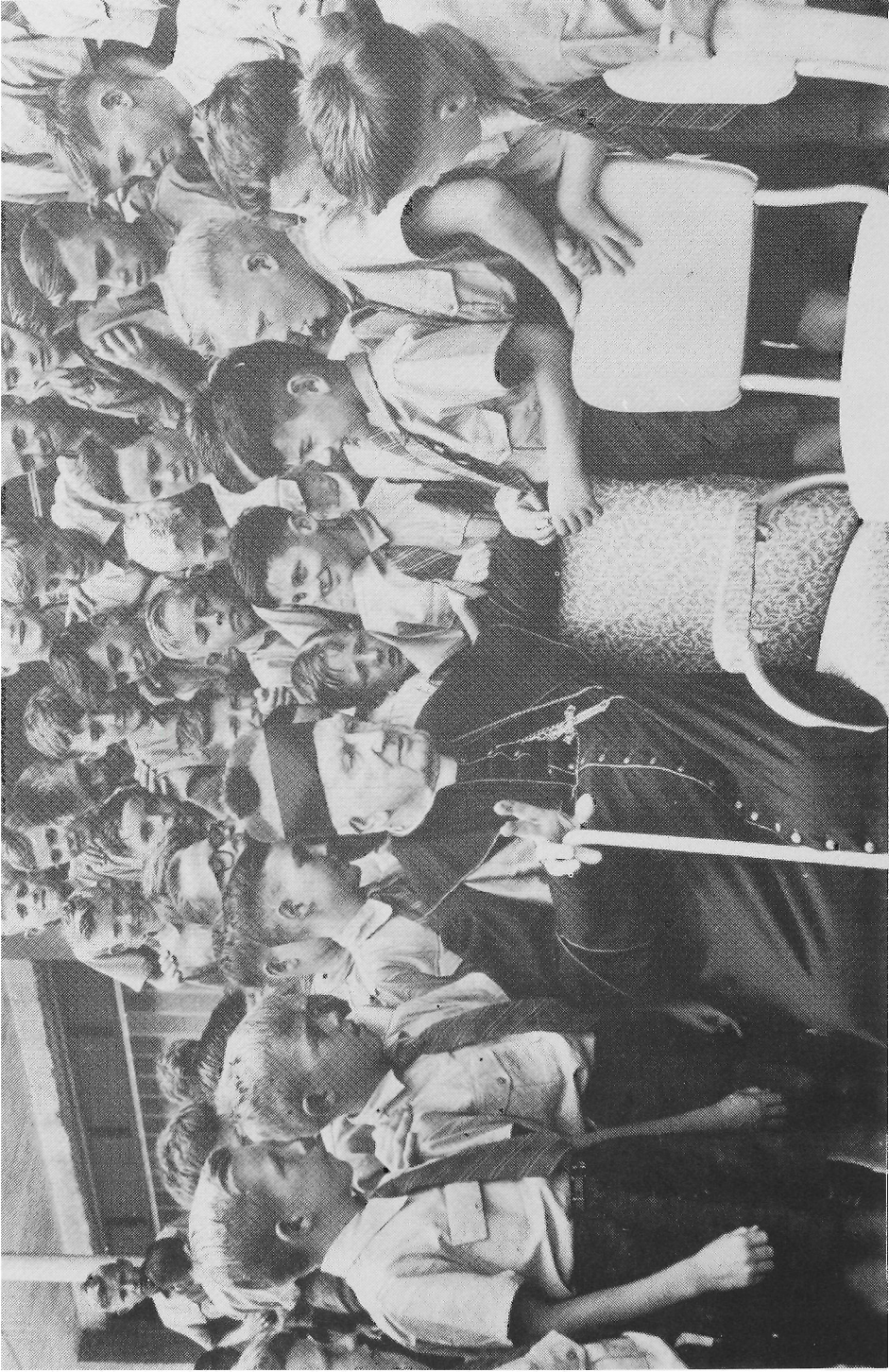
scarcely a weekend passed in which he did not open or lay the foundation stone of some church building. Frequently there were two functions on the one afternoon, and three were not unknown. On those rare occasions when there was nothing to open he would enquire querulously what the clergy were doing.²⁰

Towards the end of his long reign Duhig liked to admire his role as a creator of modern Brisbane. At the opening of a new parish church at Enoggera in 1961, for instance, he told the congregation:

I think I was one of the few who realised the beauty of the site selected for the capital of Queensland, and I am pleased that the Church has been able to do so much to enhance its natural beauty . . . Some people tell me that I have picked the eyes out of Brisbane. They might more appropriately have said that we have adorned the hills and environment of the city with buildings that have made an impressive contribution to its dignity and importance.²¹

As well as churches, the 1950s saw a wave of new buildings for Catholic schools and hospitals. These included Villanova College at Coorparoo, Mount Olivet Hospital for the Incurably Sick and Dying, and two residential colleges, St Leo's for men and Duchesne for women, at the St Lucia campus of the University of Queensland.

The Catholic religious gatherings that were held in Brisbane in the 1950s were the largest regularly held in Australia at that time. Each



Archbishop James Duhig, surrounded by school children, 2 February 1959, after opening a new building at De La Salle College, Scarborough.

year, in May or June, there was a Corpus Christi procession at the Brisbane Exhibition Grounds. Archbishop Duhig's estimates of crowds were 'elastic'. 'Year by year he added another ten thousand to the total reported to Rome', until a peak of 100,000 was reached in the mid-1950s.²² Every Catholic school in Brisbane sent hundreds of pupils who marched in uniform alongside parishes, sodalities, migrant groups and (for the first time in 1957) orders of nuns. In 1955 the *Catholic Leader* observed that the worshippers 'represented every calling in life from the office boy to the Judge and Cabinet Minister. They came from every quarter of the city and suburbs and from the near country towns.'²³

There were many other big Catholic gatherings during this period: the huge Rosary rally at the Exhibition Grounds at the end of Father Patrick Peyton's Rosary Crusade in 1953; the pageant and ceremonies to mark the close of Marian Year in December 1954; and the Queensland Catholic centenary celebration rally in September 1959. The arrival in Brisbane in June 1951 of the pilgrim statue of Our Lady of Fatima — which was being taken around the world by air, as the symbol of the Catholic crusade against Communism — saw an extraordinary display of popular piety. After its Sunday evening arrival at the Eagle Farm airport, the statue was transported in a decorated car to St Stephen's Cathedral, in a procession of two hundred cars, the road being lined with people singing hymns and reciting the rosary.

Outside the cathedral, Elizabeth Street was blocked with people, all saying the rosary and trying to get a glimpse of the statue. At a Mass celebrated at midnight, a thousand people received Holy Communion, most of them having been to confession beforehand. To Protestants, in Brisbane as elsewhere in Australia, the whole thing reeked of idolatry and superstition.²⁴

If there was one incident that symbolised the position of Catholicism in Brisbane in the early 1950s, it was at the Marian Year ceremonies at the Exhibition Grounds in December 1954. At the base of the statue of the Virgin Mary bouquets of flowers were placed by Archbishop Duhig and his coadjutor Archbishop O'Donnell, the State Premier, V. C. ('Vince') Gair, and the Police Commissioner, Patrick Glynn. It clearly demonstrated the close relationship between the Catholic Church and the powerbrokers.²⁵

METHODIST AND PRESBYTERIAN

Anglicans and Roman Catholics together comprised almost three-fifths of the population of Brisbane. The next largest religious bodies were the Presbyterians and the Methodists. They were almost exactly the same size, both in church membership and in nominal adherence, but their social composition and areas of strength differed slightly. At the 1954 census Methodists were strongest — about one in seven

Nundah to Chermside and Kedron, and also in Morningside, Newmarket and Graceville. They comprised only 6 per cent of the inhabitants of Ascot, and of the inner city and adjacent areas. Church methods which worked well in middle suburbia brought little success in inner suburbs such as Paddington or Spring Hill:

A constantly changing population, unsatisfactory environment, and very often a poor home background has made the task of preaching and teaching the gospel in this locality by no means easy.²⁶

Nor did they have much success at Inala, a satellite town on the southern edge of Brisbane, planned and built during the 1950s by the Queensland Housing Commission, despite regular subsidies from denominational funds. Meeting the spiritual needs of the low-income families of Inala, where half the population was under fifteen, was 'the biggest challenge we have ever had to face'.²⁷ In 1967 the small Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational congregations at Inala pooled their resources and formed a Co-operative Christian Parish.

Presbyterians were, on average, wealthier than other Protestants, better educated and well represented among employers. As a proportion of the population they were weakest in the inner urban area and strongest in the south-western suburbs - St Lucia (almost one in five of the population), Toowong, Corinda and Indooroopilly.

It was in the home-owning, middle-income residential suburbs that both Presbyterians and Methodists had their most flourishing congregations.²⁸ The largest Methodist circuits in Brisbane in the 1950s were Nundah, Kedron-Chermside, and Coorparoo. One of the biggest Sunday morning congregations worshipped in the neo-gothic brick church at Chermside, opened in 1950. Among its members was A.S. (later Sir Alan) Hume, a Liberal Member of the House of Representatives and Minister of Supply from 1958 to 1961. When the Rev. R.S.C. Dingle returned to Chermside Methodist Church to preach:

it was so crowded that I had difficulty in finding my way into the pulpit. What a service! Hearty congregational singing led by a good choir accompanied by a splendid pipe organ — undreamed of in former days — and orchestra, and above all, an atmosphere of reverence.²⁹

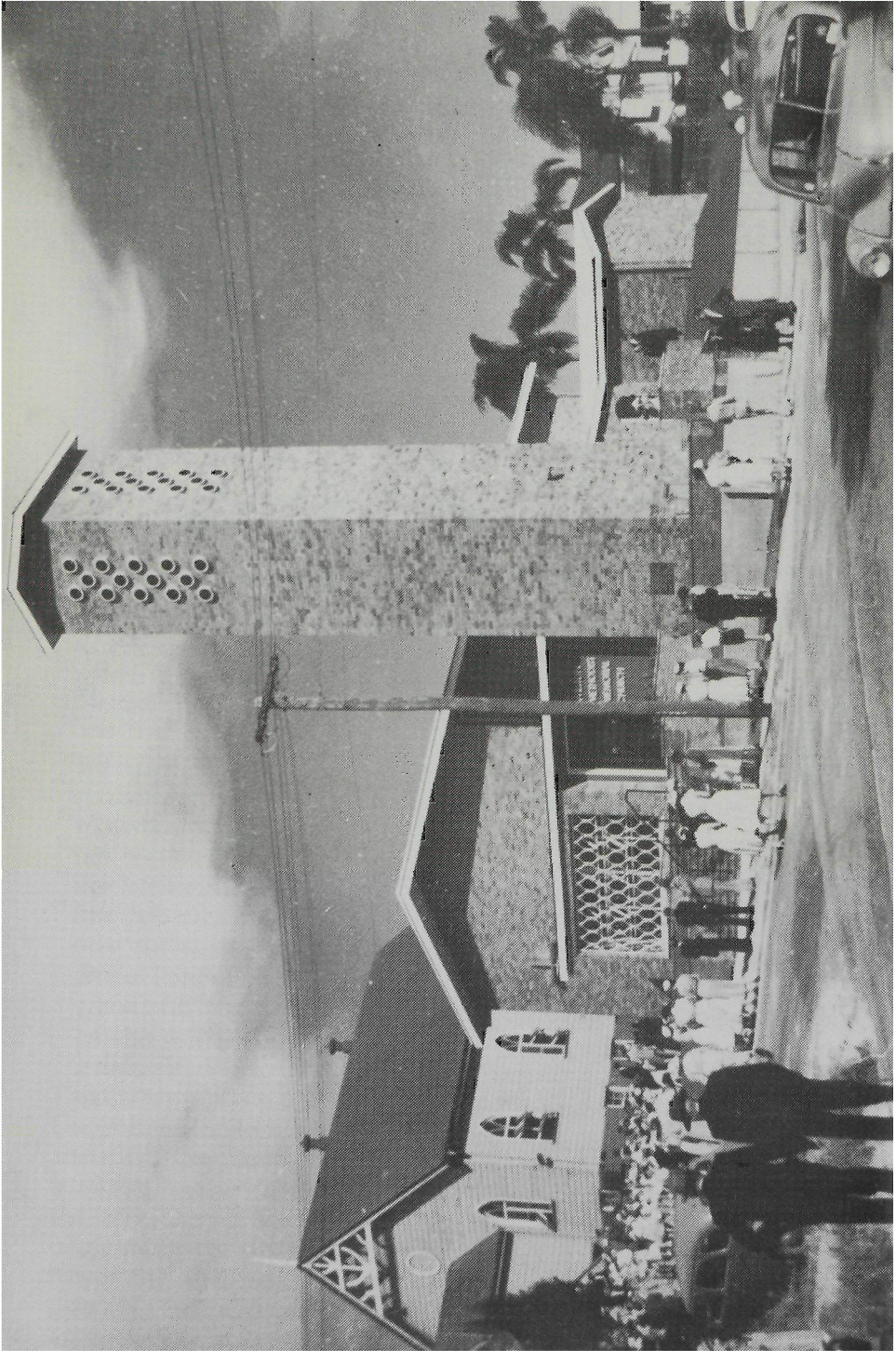
The Coorparoo Methodist Circuit, which included the suburbs of Coorparoo, Camp Hill and Holland Park, had five hundred members and 1500 children in its Sunday schools, before the circuit was divided in 1956. The biggest suburban Presbyterian churches at the end of the 1950s were at Sherwood (with almost four hundred communicant members), Clayfield, St Lucia and Toowong. The principal Presbyterian church in the city, St Andrew's in Ann Street, with eight hundred communicants on its roll, drew its congregation from all parts of the metropolitan area. In 1960, using volunteers from the

congregation, it organised Brisbane's first Meals on Wheels service, to provide hot meals for sick and elderly people in their own homes.

The two denominations diverged in their approach to social issues and in their style. Methodists were activist, pragmatic, and rather fond of words. They were strongly opposed to the 'liquor traffic'. Through the Brisbane Central Mission they ran an impressive range of welfare services, and in 1953 the West End Mission initiated the Blue Nursing Service, for nursing the sick in their own homes. They also owned the Queensland Book Depot, the largest bookshop in the city. The most prominent Methodist churchman at the beginning of the decade was the Rev. Harold M. Wheller, who retired in 1952 after an influential ministry of twenty-five years as superintendent of the Central Mission and minister of Albert Street Methodist Church.³⁰ It was significant that the citizens' farewell in the Brisbane City Hall was attended by Archbishop Duhig, who had always cultivated good relations with other church leaders and made a point of attending civic functions.

Methodists were expansionist in outlook. They wanted to grow, and they loved the sound of old-fashioned revivalist preaching and hymn singing. In a sermon at Albert Street Methodist Church in 1951, the Rev. George Nash declared that the 'greatest need of Australia today is an aggressive church. It is the standing army of the kingdom of God.'³¹ Methodist optimism in the post-war years was demonstrated in a series of national evangelistic campaigns, which climaxed in the Mission to the Nation, led by the Rev. Alan Walker, from 1953 to 1957.³²

The first of Walker's missions in Brisbane, in July 1953, was the most successful of the three he held in the city, with generous newspaper coverage and considerable public interest. Thousands of people went to the City Hall to hear him preach, every lunchtime and evening, for a week. His advertised subjects included 'How do you know there is a God?', 'Is the Bible True?', 'A Faith to Live By', and 'Reconciliation for a Divided World'.³³ Unlike other evangelists who preached a message of individual salvation, Walker attempted to link individual conversion with the practical application of Christianity to every area of Australian life. In his addresses and newspaper articles he tackled such issues as nuclear warfare, the White Australia policy, sub-standard housing and the 'exploitation of sex'. His meetings attracted a large number of non-churchgoers who, when asked by a newspaper reporter why they had come, said they believed that 'the world and Australia needed something and Mr Walker seemed to have the answer'.³⁴ The climax of the Mission to Brisbane was a 'procession of witness' of six thousand Methodists, marching through the city streets to a rally which overflowed from the City Hall into King George Square and the adjacent Albert Street Church. It was claimed that the Mission to the Nation had attracted bigger crowds



*The new Wilston Methodist Memorial Church on its opening day, 21 April 1956, with the old 1913 church at the left.
John Oxley Library*

in Brisbane, more known conversions and bigger financial support than in any other capital city. The final rally was 'a gathering such as the Protestant Church in Brisbane had never seen before'.³⁵

Presbyterians were more sedate. Among Protestants (apart from the Lutherans) they were unusual in including several thousand adherents from non-British backgrounds. Most of these were Dutch post-war migrants, who in 1954 formed a separate Queensland Dutch congregation, at St Paul's Church. There was also a congregation of Hungarian Presbyterians, who from 1951 held quarterly services in their own language. Many older Presbyterians were still in love with a romantic Scottish past: pipe bands had annual church parades, and some churches held a Burns Night or St Andrew's Night concert every year, with bagpipes and the singing of folksy Scottish songs.

Presbyterians were divided theologically in a way which the less intellectual Methodists were not. On one wing were Evangelicals, led by the Rev. Harold J. Whitney (appointed in 1951 as State Evangelist by the Queensland General Assembly), who saw religious revival and individual conversion as the key to solving all social and religious problems.³⁶ On the other wing were a theologically liberal group of young ministers, interested in ecumenism and modern theology, whose most prominent figures were James Peter and Lloyd Geering, on the staff of the theological hall at Emmanuel College.³⁷ Presbyterians were also divided in their attitude towards the temperance movement. Every year the state's General Assembly, meeting in Brisbane, passed resolutions opposing the liberalising of the state's liquor laws, but everyone knew that some ministers, and a good many lay Presbyterians, enjoyed an occasional drink.

The other Protestant denominations were much smaller. In 1954 Baptist adherents comprised just under 2 per cent of the population of Brisbane overall. Self-declared Congregationalists comprised 0.7 per cent of the population, Churches of Christ and Salvation Army 0.5 per cent, and Seventh-day Adventists 0.3 per cent.³⁸ They were thinly spread everywhere. Unlike the Anglicans, however, a high proportion of their adherents were regular church attenders and actively involved in church life. In 1954, of the 9300 self-declared Baptists in Brisbane, more than 2200 were baptised adult members. Their largest congregations were in the city. The Baptist City Tabernacle in Wickham Terrace had five hundred members and Ann Street Church of Christ had a membership of just under four hundred throughout the 1950s. The Baptists came closest to the Methodist-Presbyterian pattern, with their greatest strength in middle-ranking suburbs such as Tarragindi, Greenslopes, Indooroopilly and Nundah, but thinly represented in the inner suburbs and city.

Post-war emigration from Greece and eastern Europe had led to a big increase in the number of Orthodox in Brisbane, from 1300 in

1947 to 5000 in 1954. Although only 1 per cent of the city's total population, they comprised 6 per cent of the population of the old inner suburbs of South Brisbane and West End. The largest community was the Greek Orthodox. In the 1950s there was only one Greek Orthodox church in Brisbane and one priest, the Very Rev. C.M. Boyazoglu, Archimandrite of Southern Queensland. Its old church, in Charlotte Street, was replaced by a new and larger church in South Brisbane, consecrated in 1960.³⁹

RELIGIOUS OPTIMISM

During the 1950s the population of Brisbane grew by 25 per cent; in 1954 the population of the metropolitan area passed the half-million mark. New housing estates and new suburbs developed in every direction: Stafford and Geebung in the north; Carina in the east; Mitchelton in the west; Mount Gravatt, Sunnybank, Acacia Ridge and Inala in the south. The family-centred 1950s and post-war prosperity produced an environment which favoured traditional religious institutions. For every major denomination in Brisbane, as elsewhere in Australia, the second half of the decade was a period of membership growth. This was accompanied by a marked improvement in church finances.⁴⁰

Adult church membership grew a little faster than the rise in population (Table 2). Communicant membership of the Presbyterian Church and (adult) membership of the Methodist Church in the Brisbane metropolitan area increased by more than 50 per cent between 1947 and 1961 and their Sunday school enrolments doubled. Church planning strategists believed that the two were linked: 'It has long been recognised that the establishment of Sunday Schools in new housing areas is a fruitful way of promoting the growth of new congregations.'⁴¹ The number of Anglican confirmations (related of course to the post-war 'baby boom') in urban parishes of the diocese of Brisbane rose from 1331 in 1951 to 2017 in 1961. Suburban Protestant and Anglican churches regularly reported 'record congregations' at Easter, Christmas and other special occasions.⁴²

In church finances the turning point came in 1955 when an American-based fund-raising firm, the Wells Organisation, extended its operations to Queensland. 'Planned giving' and 'stewardship' were the new catchwords. The Wells Organisation worked on the assumption that if people could be persuaded to give a significant amount of money regularly to their church they would begin to attend regularly to ensure that it was being put to good use. Financial commitment would lead to spiritual awakening. The 'Wells Way' included a 'loyalty dinner', the enlistment of socially prominent men

Table 2
Protestant church membership and Sunday school enrolments
in Brisbane metropolitan area, 1947-66

Census Year	Methodist		Presbyterian	
	Members	Sunday School enrolments	Communicants	Sunday School enrolments
1947	5450	6414	5351	4201
1954	6510	10524	5847	7395
1961	8251	12734	8247	9155
1966	8881	13097	9769	9022

Census Year	Baptist		Churches of Christ	
	Members	Sunday School enrolments	Communicants	Sunday School enrolments
1947	2052	2472	879	743
1954	2177	3745	1053	853
1961	2962	5690	1497	1396
1966	3486	5732	1454	1442

Sources: Methodist Church of Australasia, *Minutes of the Queensland Annual Conference*; Presbyterian Church of Australia, *Minutes of Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland*; Baptist Union of Queensland, *Year Books*; Churches of Christ, Queensland Conference, annual statistics in *Christian Echo*.

and women to chair various committees (regular churchgoing was not a prerequisite), and solicitation of weekly pledges for a three-year period. The new method worked. To their surprise, the churches found that many nominal members could be persuaded to pledge. In Brisbane the total income of Presbyterian parishes, for instance, rose from 96,000 pounds in 1954 to 230,000 pounds in 1960.

By the late 1950s the atmosphere in church circles was buoyant. With increased incomes, big building programmes were in full swing — new churches, new houses for ministers, church halls for new housing areas. In established suburbs a large number of spacious brick churches were designed in modern style, to replace small and often shabby wooden buildings.⁴³

The religious confidence of the late 1950s climaxed in a number of special events in 1959, the state's centenary year. The most important was the Billy Graham Crusade, held in May 1959 during the evangelist's visit to Australia and New Zealand.⁴⁴ The invitation to Billy Graham to conduct an 'All Queensland Crusade' came from the Queensland Council of Churches, supported with varying degrees

of enthusiasm by all the major Protestant denominations. Methodist ministers and lay people were particularly active on the various planning committees, and as choir members, counsellors and ushers. The organising secretary was the Queensland evangelist, Harold J. Whitney. In 1956, on a visit to the United States he had confronted Graham with the direct question: 'And when are you coming to Australia, Billy?'⁴⁵ Apart from a few Evangelical parishes, such as St Stephen's Coorparoo, the Church of England in Brisbane was half-hearted — neither opposed nor enthusiastic. Archbishop Halse did not give his official support. A writer in the diocesan paper reflected a view that was influential among parish clergy:

... Graham's Crusades, like all revivals that depend on emotionalism and superficial appeal, are like waves — they come — they go. I prefer the old ways — the ways of Scripture — the ways of our forefathers — the steady work and growth of Christ's Holy Church.⁴⁶

Because the rules of the Roman Catholic Church (until 1965) strictly forbade Catholics to take part in joint worship with other Christians, there was no question of Catholic participation in the Crusade.⁴⁷

Billy Graham's 'All Queensland' Crusade lasted for two weeks. The initial meetings were conducted at Milton Tennis Courts by Leighton Ford, Graham's brother-in-law, with Graham himself preaching at the final three rallies at the Exhibition Grounds. As elsewhere in Australia, the meetings were transmitted by landline relays to country towns and provincial cities. The Premier of Queensland, G.F.R. Nicklin (whose Country-Liberal Party coalition had defeated Labor at the 1957 state election), chaired Graham's opening meeting and welcomed him to the state. The climax came in a huge gathering of eighty thousand people on the afternoon of Sunday 31 May - 'the biggest crowd ever assembled for a Queensland religious meeting'. Billy Graham preached on Isaiah, chapter 53.⁴⁸ Almost four thousand people came forward to make their 'decision for Christ'. Never before, reported the *Methodist Times*, had 'Brisbane witnessed such demonstrations of religious fervour as was obvious on Sunday'.⁴⁹

The attendances at the Crusade, as a proportion of the non-Roman Catholic population of Brisbane, were impressive: almost three hundred thousand, with twelve thousand 'enquirers'. Among the enquirers, Methodists were the largest single denominational group, outnumbering both Anglicans and Presbyterians, and Albert Street Methodist Church in the city received 190 referrals from the Crusade organisation.⁵⁰ Many Protestant churches felt an immediate impact — a rise in the religious temperature and increased attendances at services. After the excitement was over the president of the Churches of Christ women's fellowship wrote to her 'sisters':

While the Graham Crusade was on in Brisbane we hardly had time to breathe, so involved were most of us in it; but it was something I wouldn't have missed for worlds. It proved a wonderful blessing to all of us.⁵¹

Archbishop Halse, on the other hand, was not so impressed. He applauded the 'extraordinary interest in spiritual values' which the Crusade had produced, but wondered 'how many thoughtful people have been "put-off" by the over-simplicity of the fundamentalist approach to the Bible', and whether some converts may have been diverted by counsellors from the true faith of the Church. The historian of Queensland Anglicanism believed that the effect of the Crusade on the Anglican Church in Brisbane was 'generally speaking . . . very small'.⁵²

It was a year of religious celebrations. Brisbane Catholics marked the state's centenary with their customary huge public ceremonies and two visiting cardinals. Cardinal Agagianian from the Vatican opened new buildings costing 110,000 pounds at Pius XII Regional Seminary at Banyo, which were needed to accommodate the increased number of students for the priesthood. In May Archbishop Duhig, at the age of eighty-eight, received a knighthood; he was only the second Catholic bishop in the British Empire to be so honoured. It was also the first year of television in Queensland. In 1959 the Christian Television Association was formed in Brisbane and on Christmas Day the A.B.C. televised a stately Solemn Eucharist from St John's Cathedral, which was the first direct telecast from a Queensland church.

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The religious culture of Brisbane in the post-war years was shaped by many forces. The high level of cultural homogeneity in Brisbane produced religious stability and an attachment to traditional expressions of piety. In Brisbane's sub-tropical climate, outdoor religious gatherings usually attracted large crowds, which were greater in proportion to the size of the population than anywhere else in Australia at the time. In addition, there was the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, led by the patriarchal figure of Archbishop Duhig, who for four decades had built churches and convents on so many of the city's hills. The sheer size of Brisbane's Catholic subculture and its close connections with the state Labor government until the late 1950s had the effect among Protestants of sharpening a sense of solidarity and stimulating their religious activity.

For all of Brisbane's churches the 1950s were very good years. In the second half of the decade they enjoyed a feeling that they were growing in numbers and in financial prosperity. As their active

membership expanded and their new buildings multiplied, they expected the upward trend to continue. In 1962, at the end of his term of office as President of the Queensland Methodist Conference, the Rev. N.H. Grimmett believed that there had been a 'reassuring turn in the tide of religious interest', which inspired 'a confidence in the Church's vitality and progress'.⁵³ He reflected the optimism of his generation of Brisbane church leaders. No one could foresee that major religious upheavals lay ahead.

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 - 1958 Camp Hill Methodist, Kedron Methodist, St Matthew's, Holland Park, St Stephen's, Coorparoo
 - 1959 St Michael and All Angels', New Farm, St Francis', Nundah, St Mary's, Redcliffe, City Congregational Church, Coorparoo Methodist, Kedron Church of Christ
 - 1960 Toowong Presbyterian, Wynnum Presbyterian
 - 1962 Ashgrove Methodist, Holland Park Methodist, Christ Church, St Lucia, St Lucia Methodist
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