

CENTENARY HISTORY OF THE WEMBLEY UNITING CHURCH

One hundred years ago Mildred Grigg started a Sunday School in the home which she shared with her parents at 45 Pangbourne Street, in what was then known as the Church Lands Estate. This name derived from the fact that a large tract of land north of the Subiaco railway station belonged to the Roman Catholic Church, which sold much of it for housing just before the First World War. It was not until 1924 that the then expanding suburb was re-named Wembley Park, in the year that a British Empire Exhibition was held in Wembley in London.

Mildred Grigg's Pioneer Sunday School (its first name, although in her first annual report she called it the Church Hill Methodist Sunday School) commenced on 11 February 1917 with just four children – Laurel and Mervyn Caporn, and May and Bill McLean. By the end of the year there were 26 names on the roll, despite having lost several children to the Anglican Church which had opened its first building near Herdsman Lake in the same year. It only took several months before worship services started in the Grigg home, at first monthly and then fortnightly from May 1918. The first of these services was held on Sunday 29 April 1917 and was conducted by Rev Harley Morrell, the minister at the West Leederville Methodist Church.

As the numbers grew it became evident that a church building would be needed, and in accordance with Methodist procedure a Trust was formed and the block of land at 35 Pangbourne Street was purchased. In February 1918 the Methodist Conference granted permission for a church to be built at Churchlands at a cost of one hundred and fifty pounds. Raising the necessary funds was difficult and several attempts to provide a building came to nothing. Eventually, in 1922, a wooden church building was obtained from Bullfinch, and it had to be brought by rail to the Subiaco station and then carted to the Pangbourne Street site. It was erected towards the rear of the block, along with an extra room (which remained until it was demolished in 2004 and was known as 'The Den' when converted into a meeting place for the Youth Group), a toilet and an organ. This church building was dedicated at an evening service in February 1923. Later that year, the services moved from the evening to 4.00pm, but in 1929 they reverted to 7.30pm with the occasional morning service also being held.

When the name of the suburb changed in 1924 the name of the church accordingly changed to the Wembley Park Methodist Church. Until that time the congregation had been part of the West Perth circuit, but in the same year the circuit structure was altered because of the expansion of the church into newer suburbs, and Wembley Park became part of the Leederville circuit.

By placing the Bullfinch building at the rear of the block, it seemed clear that there was a vision to construct a more permanent church at the front of the block. But the Sunday School numbers had fluctuated and the number of church members was actually quite small, so all that could be done for some years was some additions to the existing structure, including a large room at the back, and a porch at the front. Fund-raising by the Ladies Guild and the use of voluntary labour and 'busy bees' enabled these improvements to be made. The addition of the new room in 1931 meant that it was possible to divide the Sunday School into senior and kindergarten sections, and there were now 87 on the roll.

In the late 1930s a concentrated effort was made to construct a new church building. Besides obtaining a loan, the members raised funds by printing small 'books of bricks' and taking them to encourage people to "buy a brick" towards the new building. Just as the

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Sunday School had started during the dark days of the First World War, so the building of the church occurred during the Second World War. The congregation was fortunate in having as one of its members a contract builder, Ron Turner, who gave up six months of his accrued long service leave to organise the building work.

The foundation stone of the new church was laid on 15 March 1941 by Mildred Grigg, and the finished building was opened on Saturday 31 May 1941 by Mrs Hyde, the wife of the previous minister. At the 11.00am worship service the following day, Mildred Grigg sang the solo Song of Thanksgiving (an appropriate choice), and the preacher was the minister, Rev Alwyn Broadbent. Celebrations extended over the following two weeks with services, rallies, meetings, reunions for the Ladies Guild and the Wembley court of the Order of Knights (young men's organisation) culminating in the Church Anniversary on 15 June. The preacher at the morning service on that occasion was the President of the Methodist Conference, Rev William Arthur Hay, a great-uncle of our present minister, Rev Anne McAndrew. At this time Eric Cornish was secretary of the Trust as well as the church organist, while Joe Little was the organiser of the celebrations as well as the superintendent of the Sunday School. Both men were prominent leaders in the congregation over many years. So was Jess Evans, who was the superintendent of the kindergarten, but there were many others who provided tireless leadership in support of the minister, who often stayed for only a year or two before being moved by the Conference to another 'station'. Joe Little's standing in the wider church was recognised by his appointment in 1971 as the first lay vice-president of the WA Methodist Conference.

Joe Little was instrumental in setting up the Wembley-Leederville Youth League, which was inaugurated with a rally in the Leederville Town Hall in 1945. The motto of the League was "The Utmost for the Highest" and its members were to strive for spiritual development, physical fitness and cultural attainment. The League was ecumenical in nature, comprising nine clubs or sporting teams run by the Methodist, Church of Christ and Congregational churches in Wembley and Leederville. The League conducted weekend camps as well as concerts and plays in the Leederville Town Hall. One of the affiliated clubs was the Musical and Drama Club, under the leadership of Ron Turner and Harold Malcolm, and the Drama Club flourished in the Wembley Methodist Church into the 1960s. The opening of the new hall with its elevated stage provided the venue for the production of numerous plays and other entertainments by a group which contained many talented young people.

The wooden building from Bullfinch had become the hall when the present church was opened at the front of the block in 1941. The new hall and a minister's vestry was opened in 1955 (the meeting room was added in 1963), and at that time the Bullfinch building was donated to Good Samaritan Industries and transported to its complex in Welshpool. By the time of the Second World War both the Sunday School and the congregation had grown considerably, reflecting the increasing population of the suburb. The hey-day of the Sunday School was in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. There were 176 on the roll in 1941, 209 in 1946 with a staff of 28, and even as late as 1968 enrolment totalled 120 and there were 20 teachers. A gradual decline set in from around 1970 but a Sunday School or other form of children's activity was maintained until quite recently.

During the years of the large Sunday School it met at 9.30am with the service of worship following at the then traditional time of 11.00am – although for many years the better attended service was the one in the evening – this was before the days of television and other modern distractions!. So both the church and the hall were needed to accommodate such

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large numbers, while classes for younger teenagers were held in nearby private homes. The Kindergarten met in the hall at 11.00am, at the same time as the service.

The Sunday School Anniversary in October or November was a special highlight of each year. The men of the church set up a tiered platform along the back of the church and as many as six Anniversary services were held over two weekends in the morning, afternoon and evening, followed by prize giving on the following Monday night. Weeks of preparation went into the Anniversaries, with a high standard of singing which at times was accompanied by a small group of instrumentalists.

Many faithful people served as Superintendents and Sunday School teachers over the years, following in the footsteps of Mildred Grigg (later Dawson). Mildred was active in the community as a music teacher, and when she died in 1975 her piano was left to the church. It still occupies a special place in the church building and provides an important link to the very beginning of the congregation.

Due to the development of new housing in the area now known as Glendalough in the 1950s, a branch of the Sunday School was opened in the Wandarra (later Lake Monger) primary school and this work continued for about eight years. Edgar Crawford, who had been the Superintendent of the Sunday School at Wembley, helped to start the Sunday School for the new Floreat church, and others provided help to the Wembley Downs congregation. With many former Wembley members moving into the newer western suburbs, connections between the three churches were to continue for many years.

Besides Sunday School Anniversaries and picnics, another event which was always looked forward to was the Harvest Festival service. Trestle tables at the front of the church were adorned with a great display of fresh fruit such as figs, grapes, melons and apples, as well as jams and different breads of all shapes and sizes. All the windows would be framed with wheat. The Monday evening was set aside for auctioning the produce and this was followed by a social with musical and other items and then supper. Harvest Thanksgiving is a tradition that has been kept alive in this congregation, although not necessarily held every year, and with a change to mainly processed rather than fresh food – but nevertheless a means by which thanks may be given to God for all the blessings that have been bestowed upon us. Members of the congregation are now also encouraged to bring non-perishable food to the communion service on the first Sunday of each month. They are then donated to Uniting Aid (formerly known as Dove House) in Nollamara, where they are distributed to needy families.

In 1962 a Ladies Evening Fellowship was commenced. A Men's Society was formed in 1957 and met until 1973, when it became an inter-church committee, representing the four denominations in Wembley. The work of this committee continued for six years, co-ordinating ecumenical activity in musical plays, concerts and Christmas carol services. For some years a weekly Healing Fellowship was run in conjunction with St Edmund's Anglican Church. Christian Endeavour as an ecumenical organisation for young people was also very strong at Wembley for a number of years.

Until 1960 the centre of the circuit's work was West Leederville. In that year a house in Jersey Street was bought as a manse for the minister and Wembley now became the new centre. Rev Harold Watson came from England in the same year and was the first to occupy the manse. The membership of the congregation when first reported in 1925 was five; at the time of the 50th anniversary (curiously held in 1968, perhaps to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the Ladies Guild) it stood at 158. At this time the ministry of Rev John Gilks had a particular resonance with younger people who were attracted by new forms of popular

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music and drama. The minister at Wembley continued to have oversight of the West Leederville congregation, but a gradual decline there led to the closure of the church in 1987.

In 1977 the Uniting Church came into being and the four Methodist churches in the Leederville circuit combined with the All Saints Presbyterian Church in Floreat to form the Wembley-Floreat Parish, which had three ministers. Old ways did not easily transform into new ways. In the 1980s all the young people in the parish were encouraged to form a combined youth group centred at All Saints, and from this time on the Wembley congregation had a virtual absence of young people. Further disruption occurred when the minister at All Saints and a group of parishioners moved away to form a new parish at Churchlands, later becoming a separate fellowship outside the Uniting Church. With Wembley Downs desiring to also become a separate parish, at the conclusion of Rev Vijay Paul's term at the end of 1989 Wembley became a single congregation parish as well. It could only afford a part-time minister but Rev Gerald Duncan, recently arrived from USA, was available to work with the congregation on that basis.

Between 1995 and 1998 Wembley shared a full-time minister (Rev David Lewis) with the adjoining Subiaco Parish, which consisted of two quite small congregations at Bagot Road and Derby Road. This meant some adjustment to the congregation's relationship with its minister, as well as a slight change in worship time to enable the minister to be in at least two of the three congregations on each Sunday morning (the evening service having closed in 1992). At that time Wembley was probably the most likely of the three congregations to provide resources for renewal and growth. However, some disquiet was caused by a suggestion that Wembley should be closed to enable the establishment of a café-church in the newly developed Subi Centro area. Although the latter project did go ahead (as the Warehouse Café in Shenton Park) following the sale of the church properties in Subiaco and Shenton Park, Wembley wished to continue providing its witness and place of worship within its own community. While the Warehouse Café continues as a centre run by the Uniting Church, the congregation associated with it ceased some years ago.

Further difficulties arose following the controversy about sexuality that came to a head at the Uniting Church's National Assembly in Perth in 1997, resulting not only in a loss of members but also disruption to what was previously a close-knit sense of common purpose within the congregation, and it took some time for this to be restored.

A positive happening around this time was the enrichment of the congregation through the attendance of a number of people from other countries, especially from Africa. Many of them were students at the nearby Churchlands campus of Edith Cowan University - the main drawback of this being the transient nature of these attendees, many of whom had to return to their home countries following the completion of their studies. But their presence provided diversity and gave an added incentive for the congregation to participate fully in the annual multicultural One Great Sunday of Sharing which was promoted by the Uniting Church for a number of years.

Another annual event, which was first undertaken in 2003, was Pancake Day, in which a meal of pancakes was arranged in the hall for the early evening of Shrove Tuesday. Originally promoted by the Uniting Church in WA to raise funds for the church's caring services, the event has been continued by the congregation even after the withdrawal of central support, and has proved to be not only a valuable chance to raise funds but also to provide a connection with the wider community.

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At the end of 2006 there was much sadness when the Ladies Guild (which in its later years had changed its name to the Guild Fellowship) decided to disband, due to falling numbers and the advanced age of the remaining members. For 80 years since its establishment in 1926, the Guild had not only provided fellowship for the ladies in the church, but had materially assisted the congregation in many varied and valuable ways. Its members were noted for their loyalty and some faithfully held office for several decades, such as Louie Orriss who was the secretary for over twenty years, and Joan Edwards who was the Guild's final secretary. After a gap of one year a Craft Group was established in 2008 and since then it has met on the first and third Fridays of the month in the meeting room for craft, coffee and chat. Although at first the idea was to encourage members to pursue whatever type of craft interested them, the group embarked on a project to crochet rugs for the charity Wheelchairs for Kids, and this has become its main focus up to the present time.

Though small the congregation has been able to maintain its ministry with children until the last few years. As with most churches, the era of Sunday School came to a close, but between 2012 and 2015 the congregation participated with three other western suburbs congregations in a First Third Ministry, with Jessica Morthorpe running a Kids Animal Club. The life of the Choir extended far beyond that of most other suburban churches, with a musical item in the service each Sunday as well as a major presentation each year during Advent. Close links have been maintained with the Wembley Entertainers, a community choir which uses the church hall for its rehearsals. This group actually emerged from a double duet formed by Mildred Dawson (née Grigg) and three other church ladies in the 1950s. It then became the Wembley Ladies Choir, but once some men were admitted to their ranks their name had to be changed to something more inclusive!

Over the years the hall has been extensively used not only for church purposes but by many community groups. For a long time it hosted an indoor bowls club and the Wembley Senior Citizens Club – both initially under the auspices of the church - while for the past 25 years it has been the home of Michelle Babicci's School of Dance, which while not part of the church has had a ministry in the fostering of liturgical and other Christian based dance.

Since the departure of Rev Duncan in 1993 the congregation has often struggled to find a minister prepared to fill a part-time appointment, so there have been a number of gaps as well as several longer periods of supply by recently retired ministers such as Rev James Cain, Rev Margaret Greenhill and Rev Brian Thornber. Rev Alison Longworth was the minister while she was also completing her doctorate at Murdoch University, while Rev Anne McAndrew has filled the part-time placement since 2010. With a gradual decline in worshipping numbers, extra responsibility has had to be taken by lay leaders and the congregation has been grateful for those who have given loyal service, often above and beyond the call of duty. Some of these from earlier times have already been mentioned. From 1990 to 2013 Les Earle undertook considerable administrative responsibility, for a number of years acting as the Treasurer as well as Chairperson of the Church Council, and supervising property matters including the enlargement of the porch into a foyer and 'baby's room' in 1992, and the erection of a new manse in 2002. An active member for over 50 years, Thelma Trotter has also given great service in a variety of positions and roles. And for countless others we give thanks to God.

This brief history has drawn heavily on the comprehensive book *A Church in Retrospect* by Maud Thomas, which was published in 1992 on the occasion of the congregation's 75th

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anniversary. It also uses material compiled by others who have researched the history of the church, including Eric Cornish, Rev Chris Ridings, Rev Allan Rankine and George Bindeman.

John Meyer, June 2017

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MINISTERS WHO HAVE SERVED IN THE WEMBLEY CHURCH

METHODIST CHURCH

West Perth Circuit

1917-1918	Harley Morrell
1919	David Dundas
1920-1922	Ivern Jacobs
1923-1926	Harry Moore

Leederville Circuit (from 1924)

1927-1929	Alwyn Schroeder
1930-1932	Claude Butler
1933-1936	A T Newton Hollands
1937-1939	Herbert Fennell
1940	William Hyde
1941	Alwyn Broadbent
1942-1944	Norman Hicks
1945	Raymond Hocking
1946-1948	Harry Farman
1949-1953	Edward O'Rourke
1954-1959	James Vaughan
1960-1964	Harold Watson
1964	Ross Calame
1965-1968	John Gilks
1969-1973	Leslie Goode
1974-1977	Allan Rankine

UNITING CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA

Wembley-Floreat Parish

1977-1981	Allan Rankine
1982	Arthur Meyer (supply)
1982-1989	Vijay Paul

Wembley Parish/Congregation

1990-1993	Gerald Duncan
1993-1995	James Cain (supply)
1995-1998	David Lewis
1999-2002	Margaret Greenhill (supply)
2002-2005	Alison Longworth
2006-2009	Brian Thornber (supply)
2010-	Anne McAndrew