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'A Holy Liberty in the Lord'? South Australian Baptists and Female Gender Roles, circa 1870 to 1940[1]

ABSTRACT

Between 1868 and 1940, most Baptist women in South Australia believed that their principal sphere of responsibility was the home, that the husband was head of the family, and that men should be the ones providing the main leadership in church and society. However, there was a moderate expansion of Baptist women's sphere of influence between 1870 and 1940. Despite continuing constraints, Baptist women created and controlled their own organizations and successfully pushed for a greater role in church and denominational life. Baptist women were also among those who successfully campaigned for female suffrage in the 1890s. Furthermore, they took an active part in temperance campaigns and contributed strongly to community groups that were dedicated to social improvement. This article explores changes in Baptist women's roles in the context of ideas about gender roles and femininity that were prevalent in churches and in the wider society.

Dominant Beliefs About Female Identity and Roles

In a previous article on masculinity and the development of Christian character among South Australian Baptists, I argued that Baptists believed that men should accept their God-given responsibility of providing leadership in the public sphere if they were to attain the maturity of character that God intended for them.[2] Similarly, Baptists held that women should cultivate those qualities, given to them by God, that were suitable for their responsibilities in the home and the church as

[1] Much of this article is drawn from the author's doctoral thesis, J.S. Walker, 'The Baptists in South Australia, circa 1900 to 1939' (Flinders University, Adelaide, 2006).
[2] See PJBR 5/1 April 2009: 5-26.

'helpmeets' to men. Undergirding Baptist beliefs about women was the idea that women should submit to those men who had responsibility for them. To James Gray, an influential Baptist layman, for example, there was a God-given chain of submission: the woman to man, the man to Christ, and Christ to God. He declared that women who controlled their husbands 'unsex[ed] themselves'.[3] According to this type of thinking, women should mind their place and not seek to displace male leadership in home, church or society.[4]

Baptists, almost without question, accepted that women's primary sphere of activity should be the home. In 1923, the Rev. E.R. Ledger, for example, who maintained that men were sanctified through their service in the public sphere, declared that:

> young women can find no more beautiful, no more sanctifying avenue of Christian service than within the sacred precincts of the home… Let them concentrate on this high calling, that of making the atmosphere of the home sweet, helpful and attractive… This is no mean service. It does not make our 'daughters' drudges but queens. To keep home life sweet and strong is to do a noble work for the kingdom of God. To such ministry Christ calls.[5]

Furthermore, Baptists believed that homes themselves became 'sacred precincts' which were made 'sweet, helpful and attractive' by women's service. Women were to have 'Christ in their heart', and show love, joy, peace and the other 'fruit of the Spirit' and thereby contribute 'charm and beauty'.[6] As Tosh has argued about English family relationships in the second half of the nineteenth century, 'men expected their homes to stand for a moral vision of life which would effect their own sensibilities for the better'.[7] Women, on the one hand, were seen as the weaker sex and hence vulnerable and needing protection, but on the

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[3] *Truth and Progress*, (*TP*), July 1877, 76.

[4] For a helpful discussion of the identity and roles of Baptist women in Australia, see Ken. R. Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity': A History of Australian Baptists, vol. 1, Growing an Australian Church, 1831-1914* (ed. A. Cross, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, 16.1; 2 vols; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2006), 294-318.

[5] *Baptist Record (BR)*, July 1923, 15.

[6] 'Senior Girls Missionary Union Badge: The Star Ideals', in Finsbury Park Baptist Church Senior Girls' Missionary Union, 'Book of Australia', unpublished manuscript, c. 1942, unpaged. This manuscript is currently held at the Baptist Centre, 35-39 King William Road, Unley, Adelaide.

[7] John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 55.

other hand, women (particularly mothers) were idealised as repositories, guardians and purveyors of purity. Girls' organisations associated with Baptist churches such as Phi Beta Pi and Snowdrop Bands reinforced these notions. During the initiation ceremony into Phi Beta Pi, girls were taught the meaning of the colours in the organisation's emblem. Blue stood for loyalty to whatever was noble, beautiful and good.[8] White spoke of purity and spotlessness, and were a call 'to be companions of the spotless Christ'.[9] Gold pointed to worth, and how the highest values came from toil, endurance, striving, perseverance and faith.[10] Presumably, the home was regarded as the principal site for such toil and endurance.[11]

Baptists also believed, given the moral qualities of women, that mothers should have the primary role in the moral and religious training of their children. As Gray put it, mothers had an 'especial sense' for this work.[12] Mrs. F.C. Spurr told the Australian Baptist Congress in Melbourne in 1911 that 'woman's chiefest mission' included training, aiding, brightening and interesting the 'little lives given to her in trust for God'.[13] In regard to mothers teaching their children, she claimed that 'morals make a people, but women make morals'. Mothers' Unions, modelled on the Anglican organisation of the same name, were formed in many Baptist churches in the first quarter of the twentieth century as an aid to the educative function of women in the home. Mothers' Unions included amongst their goals the awakening in 'mothers of all classes a sense of their great responsibility in the training of their boys and girls'.[14] Members were said to be united in the 'one great object' of winning their children for Christ.

Baptists also shared with many of their contemporaries the belief that the greatness of the British race (including 'Australian Britons') depended on women fulfilling their proper function in the home. In an

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[8] David H. Jemison, *The First Degree of Ritual, Order of Palestine: Supplement to the Manual of the Phi Beta Pi*, (Cincinnati, Ohio, Phi Beta Pi, 1917), 4. The companion boys' organisation to Phi Beta Pi was Kappa Sigma Pi.
[9] Jemison, *First Degree Ritual*, 5.
[10] Jemison, *First Degree Ritual*, 5.
[11] The spread of 'Mothers' Day' among Baptists and its use of the 'white flower of purity' was another indication of the association of motherhood with purity. See *Southern Baptist (SB)*, 27 July 1909, 182.
[12] *TP*, July 1877, 76.
[13] *SB*, 5 April 1911, 240. Spurr's husband, F.C. Spurr, was minister of Collins Street Baptist Church in central Melbourne.
[14] *SB*, 10 November 1903, 258.

article in the *Australian Baptist* entitled 'To the Girls of the Future: The Girl Who Loves Her Home', British Baptist author, Arthur Mee, in urging the British woman to make her home a 'shrine of sacred things', claimed that 'it is not an accident that the English race, controlling the lives of hundred of races throughout the world, is the most home-loving race of mankind.[15] The future of British and Australian society, it was thought, depended on mothers being good 'home-makers'.[16] In a similar vein, the *Australian Baptist* claimed that it was from the home

> that the vital, vitalizing and victorious energy goes forth that makes for good citizenship, and it is from the home, too, that the debilitating, destructive and demoralizing influence goes forth that undermines the strength of any nation.[17]

Mee's statement reveals how ideas about femininity were tied to concepts of race. Supposedly, the British way of being female was the epitome of femininity. The same assumptions were apparent in *Golden Gifts: An Australian Tale*, by South Australian Baptist author, Matilda Evans.[18] Evans portrays one of her characters, Edith Wallace, as filled with a mixture of disgust and pity when an aboriginal woman approached her. ' "A woman! Can it really be?" she exclaimed, in a low tone of disgust. It was a woman, wrapped in the customary blanket.'[19] The aboriginal woman was so far removed from the British ideal of womanhood that she seemed barely human. Similarly, Baptists portrayed indigenous women on overseas mission fields as being ignorant, degraded, and abused by indigenous men.[20] Baptists used such beliefs to impress on church members the urgency of mission work among Australian aborigines and foreign races.[21]

The idealisation of motherhood was sometimes used to powerful

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[15] *Australian Baptist (AB)*, 10 February 1914, 7. Mee was author of the popular *Children's Encyclopedia*.
[16] *AB*, 7 July 1914, 2.
[17] *AB*, 7 July 1914, 2.
[18] Evans (1827-1886), writing under the pseudonym of Maud Jeanne Franc, had fifteen books published in London by Sampson Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington. For many years she was a deaconess at North Adelaide Baptist Church. See Barbara Wall, *Our Own Matilda: Matilda Jane Evans, 1827-1886, Pioneer Woman and Novelist*, (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1994).
[19] Cited in Margaret Allen, ' "White Already to Harvest": South Australian Women Missionaries to India', *Feminist Review* 65 (Summer 2000), 100-101.
[20] *SB*, 13 January 1898, 20; 19 October 1911, 699.
[21] See, for example, *SB*, 20 April 1911, 268-269; J.H. Sexton, *Australian Aborigines*, (Adelaide: Aborigines Friends' Association, 1944), 88-89.

evangelistic effect. One popular evangelistic song was entitled, 'If You Love Your Mother Meet Her in the Skies'.[22] The American evangelists, Chapman and Alexander, used a song of the same ilk, 'Tell Mother I'll be There', to great effect with 6,500 men at a special men's meeting at the Exhibition Building in Adelaide in 1909

> When I was but a little child how well I recollect
> How I would grieve my mother with my folly and neglect;
> And now that she has gone to heaven I miss her tender care;
> O Saviour, tell my mother I'll be there!
>
> One day a message came to me, it bade me quickly come
> If I would see my mother ere the Saviour took her home:
> I promised her, before she died, for heaven to prepare;
> O Saviour, tell my mother, I'll be there.[23]

This was one of the most requested songs by Australian troops in Young Men's Christian Association sing-songs in the First World War.[24] To reject Christ was to reject mother, a thought too painful to bear for many young Baptists.

A corollary of the idealisation of womanhood and motherhood was the deep anxiety evinced when women did not conform to the ideal. In this regard, Baptist leaders, along with leaders of other Christian denominations, were greatly alarmed at the declining birth rate. The Rev. W.S. Rolling, South Australian editor of the *Southern Baptist*, declared in 1909 that the decline was due to 'enfeebled moral fibre, to love of pleasure and impatience of pain'.[25] Presumably, given the reference to the pain of childbirth, his comments were directed at those women whom he considered to be acting selfishly. Rolling, who was echoing the findings made in 1904 by the New South Wales Royal Commission on the Decline in the Birth-rate, believed that if the trend continued, it would result in the fall of the British empire.[26] Like many Australians of

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[22] *SB*, 31 August 1909, 206.
[23] *SB*, 27 July 1909, 182. The words of the hymn are cited in Richard Broome, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels: Protestant Christianity in New South Wales Society, 1900-1914*, (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1980), 68.
[24] *AB*, 25 June 1918, 2.
[25] *SB*, 14 September 1909, 213.
[26] On this Royal Commission, see Neville Hicks, *'This Sin and Scandal': Australia's Population Debate, 1891-1911*, (Canberra: Australian National

the time, he was probably concerned that the 'lesser' races were reproducing at a faster rate than the British.[27] Many Australians were influenced by social Darwinist theories about competition between the races, and they viewed the declining birth rate as 'race suicide'.[28]

The behaviours associated with the 'flappers' of the 1920s also drew condemnation from Baptists. Baptists regarded them as 'cheapening of womanhood'.[29] To Baptists, the ultimate 'cheapening' was sexual intercourse outside of marriage. This was euphemistically referred to by the Baptist social activist, Rosetta Birks, when she spoke of 'the downfall of all womanly virtue'.[30] Concern over the sexual behaviour of women who frequented hotels was one the principal motivations for Birks' temperance activities.[31] The desire to avoid anything that could even remotely add to the chance of sexual relations outside of marriage possibly also led many Baptist parents to avoid sexual education of their children. By the 1930s, this attitude was beginning to change and sex education was welcomed by some Baptists, but the *Baptist Record* declared that many of 'the younger married men and women of this generation can testify to the fact that sex was never once discussed between them and their parents'.[32] Young women, as was also the case with young men, were encouraged to enjoy sport and 'physical culture', literature and music, but prior to the 1930s, they were not taught about sexual pleasure. It is likely that this was not because of the previously widespread belief that women were the lascivious sex but because of the fear of the occurrence of sex outside of marriage.[33]

Baptists assumed that their beliefs about the home as the primary sphere of women's labour were completely in accord with unchanging

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University Press, 1978). Also see Susan Magarey, *Passions of the First Wave Feminists*, (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2001), 111-115.

[27] Many Australians, including the commissioners, were worried that unless the British race filled the empty spaces of Australia, then 'Asiatic hordes' would descend on the continent. Magarey, *Passions of the First Wave Feminists*, 112.

[28] On the declining birthrate and beliefs about 'race suicide', see Carol Bacchi, 'Evolution, Eugenics and Women: the Impact of Scientific Attitudes to Women, 1870-1920' in Elizabeth Windschuttle (ed.), *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia, 1788-1978*, (Sydney: Fontana/Collins, 1980), 146-149.

[29] *BR*, 15 November 1927, 3.

[30] *SB*, 29 September 1903, 221.

[31] *SB*, 29 September 1903, 221.

[32] *BR*, 18 November 1939, 13.

[33] On this changing view of women, see Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 44-46 .

biblical principles. However, they were people of their time and were more influenced by contemporary social views than they realised. They exhibited the same polarised construction of gender that was typical of many people of their era.[34] While patriarchal practice in the sense of 'father rule' had long been entrenched, the rigid demarcation of spheres enunciated by Baptists such as Ledger excluded women from the economic process to a much greater degree than had been the case prior to the nineteenth century.[35] The very term 'helpmeet' that had been used primarily to refer to the woman's role as an economic producer, now took on the meaning of service to men in the home.[36] This ideal of family life owed much, in fact, to processes such as rationalisation and specialisation whose roots can be traced to Enlightenment thought.[37] A consequence of the diminished role of the family in economic production was that 'women's family role became centered on child care and taking care of men… Women of all classes (were) now expected to nurture and support husbands in addition to providing them with food and a clean house.'[38] This resulted in an increased intensity in the mothering role of women and helped to produce a growing emphasis on the family as a 'quintessentially relational and personal institution'.[39] All these changes occurred in the context of one of modern society's most salient features, that of large-scale urbanisation.[40]

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[34] Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 46.

[35] On the use of the term 'patriarchy' in its limited sense of 'father-rule', see Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 3.

[36] Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 55.

[37] Despite some debate, historians generally agree that during the first half of the nineteenth century the degree of separation increased. For a summary of this debate, see Linda Wilson, *Constrained by Zeal: Female Spirituality Amongst Nonconformists, 1825-1875*, (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2000), 8-11.

[38] N. Chodrow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1978), 4-5. Cited in Kerreen Reiger, 'Women's Labour Redefined: Child-bearing and Rearing Advice in Australia, 1880s–1930s', in Margaret Bevege, Margaret James and Carmel Shute (eds), *Worth Her Salt: Women at Work in Australia*, (Sydney: Hale and Ironmonger, 1982), 72.

[39] N. Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, 4-5. Cited in Reiger, 'Women's Labour Redefined', 72. On the contribution of social-evolutionary thought to a more restricted role for women, see Lorna Duffin, 'Prisoners of Progress: Women and Evolution', in Sara Delamont and Lorna Duffin (eds.), *The Nineteenth-Century Woman: Her Cultural and Physical World*, (London: Croom Helm, 1978), 76.

[40] On the nineteenth-century family and processes of modernisation, see Tosh, *A Man's Place*, 4; K.M. Reiger, *The Disenchantment of the Home:*

Shifting Boundaries

To this point, the discussion of Baptist constructs of femininity has suggested that women were placed in a subordinate position to men, one that largely excluded them from the public sphere. As has been evident from the views of women cited, women largely accepted the framework of the prevailing ideology of gender relations. There is no evidence to suggest that any Baptist woman or man ever challenged the prevailing belief that home and motherhood were essential elements of God's will for the vast majority of women. However, in Australian society and much of the English speaking world in the late nineteenth century, there were shifts in boundaries between women's domestic sphere and the public world of men.[41] The same was true amongst South Australian Baptists. While these shifts in thinking amongst Baptists did not fundamentally alter established ideas about gender roles, they did help develop what British historian Linda Wilson has called a 'third sphere' for women.[42] By this she means that church life provided a sphere, part way between the private and public spheres, that facilitated a transition from private to public involvement.

An important first consideration in regard to shifting gender boundaries is Baptist church polity. Historically, Baptists believed that all members could take part in the deliberations of the ultimate decision making body of the church, the church meeting. Although the reality in local churches often did not match the official ecclesiology, the potential for women to have a significant public role in the church was sometimes realised. Susan Juster, for instance, has shown that Baptist women in New England in the first half of the eighteenth century were able to use the relative egalitarianism of Baptist polity to gain greater access to formal channels of authority than women in churches with different structures.[43] It is difficult to gauge the extent to which South Australian Baptist women participated in church meetings. Lyndoch Baptist Church in the Barossa Valley, from the time of its foundation in 1859 until 1886,

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Modernizing the Australian Family, 1880-1940, (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1985), 32-55.

[41] For an outline of feminist explorations of this theme, see Susan Magarey, 'History, Cultural Studies, and Another Look at First Wave Feminism in Australia', *Australian Historical Studies* 106 (April 1996), 100-103.

[42] Wilson, *Constrained by Zeal*, 210-211.

[43] Susan Juster, *Disorderly Women: Sexual Politics and Evangelicalism in Revolutionary New England*, (Ithica and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), introduction and chapter 1.

perhaps reflecting more restrictive definitions of femininity that emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century, prohibited women from speaking in church meetings.[44] However, it is unlikely that this practice was the norm, and by the twentieth century it seems that some women exercised a strong voice in decision-making. Mrs. J. Clark, for instance, was described as being 'a woman of strong convictions which she expressed freely', while Mrs. J. Whiting was said to be 'fearless and outspoken at all times'.[45] Presumably, both these women freely expressed their opinions in church meetings. The same can be implied about Mrs. T.J. Naismith, a resident of Black Rock in South Australia's northern wheat belt. She was described as being interested 'in every movement in the district' and that 'her opinion and influence went far in decisions of vital interest to the neighbourhood.'[46] Women's confidence in the worth of their own opinions was also displayed outside the church meeting. Mrs. A.S. Branson, for instance, was described as being a good listener who 'had her own opinion of the worth of a sermon. If the minister helped her she told him so.'[47]

The relative egalitarianism of Baptist polity also went beyond the local congregation. From its inception in 1863, the South Australian Baptist Association (SABA, renamed the South Australian Baptist Union in 1894) encouraged women to join as personal members.[48] This gave them voting rights at the annual meetings. Although it seems that very few women took up this category of membership, the egalitarianism implicit within Baptist polity was evident in the SABA's 1891 ruling that

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[44] Brice P. Menzel, *The Lyndoch Baptist Church, 1859-1985*, (Lyndoch: South Australia, Lyndoch Baptist Church), 1986, 6. The trust deed of Salem (Gumeracha) Baptist Church, drawn up in 1854, excluded female church members from voting on 'temporal' issues (presumably matters of property and finance) in church meetings, but allowed them to vote on 'spiritual' matters including the choice of church officers and ministers. Salem Baptist Church, 'Indenture', (Gumeracha: South Australia, Salem Baptist Church, 1854), 4. The practice of excluding women from speaking and or voting in Baptist church meetings was not common before the nineteenth century. See J.H.Y. Briggs, 'She-preachers, Widows and Other Women: the Feminine Dimension in Baptist Life Since 1600', *Baptist Quarterly* 31 (July 1986), 337-350.

[45] *AB*, 4 March 1913, 4; 27 April 1915, 13.

[46] *BR*, 15 December 1927, 10.

[47] *BR*, 16 September 1929, 10.

[48] South Australian Baptist Association Minutes of the General Committee (SABAMGC), 23 November 1863, Society Record Group (SRG) 465/51/7/1, State Library of South Australia (SLSA).

there was no constitutional barrier to Parkside Baptist Church's plan to send a female delegate to the SABA annual meetings.[49] This decision was essentially an extension of local church practice and gave Baptist women opportunities that were denied to women in other denominations. Similar rights were not extended to Anglican women in Adelaide until 1946.[50] Baptist women took advantage of the opportunity to participate in denominational meetings, and from the early 1890s Baptist churches appointed an increasing number of women delegates to Association (Union) meetings.

The first indications of changing views among South Australian Baptists regarding women's public participation in church life were Rev. Silas Mead's support in 1868 for the introduction of women deaconesses and his call for women to pray publicly in church services.[51] Declaring that women possessed a 'holy liberty in the Lord', he argued that deaconesses could have a positive role by attending women about to be immersed, visiting the sick and needy, giving instruction to younger women of the church, and that they could 'lovingly watch over the whole sisterhood of the church'.[52] Mead also commended women to the work of evangelism and Sunday school teaching, and in support of his views, pointed to changing attitudes in England on the role of women in church life. Keen to provide a biblical rationale for his beliefs, he argued from the New Testament that women had public ministry in the early church, but not governing authority over men.[53] Mead also pointed to the impact that women were already having in society as nurses and in their work at home and overseas of spreading the gospel. In presenting his case, Mead demonstrated the type of pragmatism that was characteristic of an evangelicalism influenced by enlightenment

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[49] SABAMGC, 2 March 1891, SRG 465/51/7/4, SLSA.

[50] David Hilliard, *Godliness and Good Order: A History of the Anglican Church in South Australia*, (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1986), 141.

[51] On the introduction of deaconesses to Baptist churches in England, see J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, (Oxford: Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 279-286. On similar developments among Australian Baptists, see Ken R. Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to Eternity*, vol. 1, 299-314.

[52] *TP*, August 1868, 159-160.

[53] Mead's views seem to have been identical to those expressed by his former theological college principal, Joseph Angus. On Angus' beliefs about the ministry of women in churches, see Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, 285.

rationality.[54] The success of women in various fields of endeavour provided a kind of *ex post facto* justification to those endeavours.[55] Mead's views had an impact. Most Baptist churches had appointed deaconesses by the end of the nineteenth century.

The same combination of pragmatism and biblicism underpinned support for two initiatives in the 1880s which gave new opportunities to women. The first initiative was the evangelistic campaigns conducted in Baptist churches by Mrs. Emilia Baeyertz, a convert from Judaism.[56] Mead's biblical rationale for widened public ministry for women helped pave the way for the acceptance of Baeyertz' public ministry, and pragmatism was strongly evident in the enthusiasm for Baeyertz' evangelistic work. Her success helped dampen continuing concerns about the propriety of women preaching.[57] Indeed her ability to win converts, sometimes numbering over a hundred in a single church, was partly attributed to her femininity. Reference was made to her 'gentle refined deportment' and 'simple, natural, womanly eloquence'.[58] The second initiative, led by Mead, was the sending of Ellen Arnold and Marie Gilbert to East Bengal as the first missionaries from South Australia sponsored by the South Australian Baptist Missionary Society.[59] While some Baptists resisted this move because they believed that God was opposed to single women undertaking missionary activity, by the twentieth century Baptists unhesitatingly accepted the existence of women missionaries.[60]

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[54] On the pragmatism of evangelicals and its relationship to the Enlightenment, see D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 65-66.

[55] I have drawn this insight from Briggs, *English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, 286.

[56] On Baeyertz's ministry in Australian Baptist churches, see Ken. R. Manley, *From Woolloomooloo to 'Eternity', vol. 1* , 211-216.

[57] *TP*, January 1881, 8.

[58] *TP*, September 1881, 101-02.

[59] For a discussion of the views of early Australian Baptist women missionaries, including Arnold and Gilbert, see Rosalind Gooden, 'Awakened Women: Initial Formative Influences on Australian Baptist Women in Overseas Mission, 1864-1913', (ThM thesis, Melbourne College of Divinity, Melbourne, 1997).

[60] Another significant development regarding women and Baptist church life was the ruling of the SABA in 1891 that churches could send female delegates to SABA meetings. SABAGCM, 2 March 1891, SRG 465/51/7/4, SLSA.

A further sign of change was the role that some Baptist women and men played in the campaign to enfranchise women. The most prominent Baptist suffrage campaigner was Rosetta Birks, a leading social activist who was a council member of the Women's Suffrage League from its inception in 1888 and was its inaugural treasurer.[61] Another leading Baptist who supported women's suffrage was George Fowler, a leading business man who was a Women's Suffrage League councillor. His daughter, Dr. Laura Fowler, the first female to qualify as a medical doctor in South Australia, was held up by the suffrage movement as an example of what women could achieve.[62] Cornelius Proud, a stockbroker and self-styled 'socialist' who was a member of Flinders Street Baptist Church, was another who campaigned strongly for women's suffrage. Proud was an honorary member of the WCTU and was made a Women's Suffrage League councillor in 1892. He had the honour of carrying a 'monster' petition in support of women's suffrage to the South Australian parliament in 1894. In that year, South Australian women received the rights to vote and stand for election.[63]

The attitudes of Lilian Mead, the daughter of Silas and Anne Mead, were typical of those Baptist women who were agitating for change. Lilian Mead, in an address entitled 'The Awakened Woman' delivered to the South Australian WCTU state convention in 1895, set out the type of arguments that appealed to many Baptists who wanted a wider role for women. In calling for equal educational opportunities she argued:

> 'Why,' the awakened woman asked, 'if the intellectually accomplished man is not unmanly, is an intellectually accomplished woman unwomanly?'
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> Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Mary Somerville answered the question. Both highly intellectual women, both ideal wives and mothers, both occupying prominent and public positions, they were intensely and undeniably womanly. The awakened woman claimed almost immediately the right to enter new spheres of

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[61] Helen Jones, *In Her Own Name: A History of Women in South Australia from 1836*, (Adelaide, Wakefield Press, 1986), 101-03; 'Birks, Rosetta Jane' in Christopher Cunneen (ed.), *Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB), Supplement 1850-1980*, (Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2005).

[62] Laura Fowler married another doctor, Charles Hope, in 1893. They worked for much of their lives as independent medical missionaries in Bengal. Jones, *In Her Own Name*, 147; Alison Mackinnon, *The New Women: Adelaide's Early Women Graduates*, (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1986), 44-60.

[63] Jones, *In Her Own Name*, 120.

> work, and proved her right to the claim by doing well what she undertook … She rightly reasoned that if even a moth does not exist only to subserve another's gain, much less does a woman.
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> Ruskin told her that a man *cannot* be helped effectively by a shadow or worthily by a slave. The nobler thought came to her almost as a revelation that God and not man is the end of existence to all his rational creatures.[64]

Lilian Mead did not challenge the notion that motherhood was pivotal to the role of women. Nonetheless, by arguing that women could be well educated and perform public functions and at the same time remain 'womanly', she challenged established ideas that education and public roles 'unsexed' women. Furthermore, her claim that 'God and not man is the end of existence' undermined the belief that women primarily existed for the benefit of men. This claim challenged the almost priestly function given to men, whereby, through a chain of authority, men stood between women and God, and between women and society outside the home.

Several notable young upper-middle-class Baptist women seized the educational opportunities available to them. Lilian Mead herself, the only girl educated at Prince Alfred College, a Methodist school for boys, achieved a first class matriculation in 1884 and commenced a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Adelaide. However, following the death of her stepmother in 1886, she withdrew from her studies to keep house for her father. Lilian never completed her degree, but did have two novels and a work of non-fiction published after moving to London with her father in 1897.[65] One of Lilian's younger sisters, Gertrude, graduated in medicine from the University of Adelaide, as did Laura Fowler. Another to pursue tertiary education was Dorothea Proud, the daughter of women's suffrage campaigners Cornelius and Emily Proud. She was a graduate of the Advanced School for Girls and the University of Adelaide. In 1912, she became the first Catherine Helen Spence Scholar in Sociology (an award given in honour of the South Australian

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[64] Lilian S. Mead, *The Awakened Woman: Paper Read at the Seventh Annual Convention of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union of South Australia*, (Adelaide: WCTU, 1895), 24-25.

[65] Mead was the only girl ever enrolled at Prince Alfred College. Her novels were: *A Brothers Need*, (1903); *Patsie's Brick's* (1905); *Daring and Doing: True Stories of Brave Deeds*, (1912). In 1900 Mead married Crosbie C. Brown, a tutor at the East London Training Institute, Harley House, London. Her father, Silas, was the principal of this institution. On Lilian Mead, see *The Advertiser*, 13 September 1994, 13.

Unitarian feminist). Proud used the scholarship to complete a doctoral thesis at the London School of Economics on the welfare of factory workers. She based her thesis on Seebohm Rowntree's initiatives for the welfare of his employees at his cocoa works in York. A book based on her thesis was published in 1916 with a foreword by the British Prime Minister, Lloyd George.[66]

Unfortunately for South Australian Baptists, these three young women were lost to them. In 1901, Gertrude Mead shifted to Perth where she practised medicine until her untimely death in 1919.[67] Lilian Mead remained in Britain, while Laura Fowler spent many years in India as a medical missionary. In 1917, Proud married an Australian soldier, Gordon Pavy, and returned to Adelaide with him two years later. She qualified for the Bar in 1928 and became a partner in her husband's legal firm. However, Proud did not retain her Baptist links.

One can only speculate about the impact these women might have had on Baptist understandings of femininity if they had remained in the denomination. There was certainly some sentiment in favour of further improvement in the position of women that they could have helped develop. In 1903, David Hollidge, for instance, a private school principal (Dorothea Proud's employer before she went to Britain), berated Baptists for the limitations they placed on women in church life. He claimed that 'the discovery of women is generally owing to the chapel debt', and that there were 'hundreds of women who devoutly wished that Dorcas had never been born.[68] The latter was a reference to Dorcas societies which sought to follow the example of Dorcas, the woman of biblical times who made clothes for the poor. If Hollidge was right, there was considerable frustration among many Baptist women about the constraints placed on them in church life.

Despite this frustration, prior to the 1920s there was no Baptist leader, female or male, who was willing to publicly challenge the notion that leadership of churches was primarily a male affair. There is no record of any protest regarding the established practice whereby a woman could serve as a deaconess and thereby help look after the

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[66] E. Dorothea Proud, *Welfare Work: Employers' Experiments for Improving Working Conditions in Factories*, (London, John Bell and Sons, 1916). On Proud, see 'Pavy', *ADB*, 11, 1891-1939, 168-169; Alison Mackinnon, *The New Women*, 126-134; Marian Sawer, *The Ethical State? Social Liberalism in Australia*, (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003), xiii, ix.

[67] Mead, Gertrude Ella, *ADB*, 10, 1891-1939. In Perth, Mead practised from her home and focused on women's and children's health and welfare.

[68] *SB*, 12 May 1903, 112.

women and children of the church, but could not serve on the day-to-day governing body, the diaconate. Only occasionally did a woman fill a position in a local church that traditionally had been filled only by men, and this usually happened in small churches when there was no man willing to take on the role. Bessie Playford, mother of Thomas Playford who was to become premier of South Australia, was one woman who followed this pattern. Early in the twentieth century she became treasurer of Norton Summit Baptist Church, a position she held for over thirty years.[69]

Baptist women did appreciate the greater opportunities in church life in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mrs. E.B. Turner, who was a voluntary worker with prisoners and their families, captured their mood when she declared that 'The twentieth century has brought to women many open doors. Oh, may we not be slow to take advantage of our privileges.'[70] Nevertheless, having gained these 'privileges', and despite some frustration over continued limitations on their scope of opportunity in church life, Baptist women eschewed any far-reaching challenge to the structure of gender relations. Instead, prior to the 1920s, Baptist women chose to extend their roles and influence in four main ways. Firstly, Baptist women, especially those who had gained respect through their religious endeavours, were sometimes able to exert greater influence than established gender ideologies normally permitted. Female missionaries, for instance, had high status in the Baptist world and they sometimes used their informal authority to telling effect. Harold Masters, recalled an encounter with Marie Gilbert, a missionary on furlough in Adelaide in 1911.

> She button holed me and said 'Young man you are needed in India. I heard you preach last night at Lockleys, and I am convinced that Christ is calling you to serve in East Bengal. Don't delay. Go, and God will give you the necessary wisdom and guidance. Go to Orakandi. Dr. Mead will give you the training you need'![71]

Masters heeded her instruction and duly became a missionary at Orakandi. Baptist ministers' wives with strong personalities, also sometimes successfully maneuvered around established gender

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[69] *BR*, 15 September 1933, 21. Playford was premier from 1938 to 1965.
[70] *SB*, 10 November 1903, 258.
[71] Redman, *The Light Shines On*, 16.

restrictions. In 1908, one church claimed that 'With our pastor at the oar and his wife at the helm, all will be well.'[72]

Secondly, Baptist women expanded their public involvement through organisations of social reform such as the WCTU and through various philanthropic organisations.[73] One example was Mary Holden, whose husband was car manufacturer Henry Holden. She helped found and support the community-based Sick Poor Fund in Norwood and was also active in affairs of the District Bush Nursing Society and the Red Cross.[74] While well-to-do Baptist women such as Rosetta Birks and Mary Holden often took a leading role in charitable and social reform organisations, many less prominent Baptist women also made substantial contributions. In 1928, it was reported of the late Mrs. G.L. Inglis, a shy, retiring woman, that next 'to her deep love of church work was her deep interest in the temperance cause, and as a member of the WCTU she filled various official positions'.[75]

Thirdly, although it is unlikely that many married Baptist women entered the paid workforce, some unmarried Baptist women did so. Teaching and nursing were popular professions for unmarried Baptist women. Alice Tibbits, for instance, was the first woman in Adelaide to train nurses, and became owner and matron of the Wakefield Street Private Hospital in central Adelaide.[76] It is also likely that some other unmarried Baptist women entered domestic service, or worked in shops, offices or factories.[77]

Fourthly, Baptist women built their own organisations. Prior to the 1920s, the main Baptist women's organisation was the Ladies' Zenana Committee. Founded in 1885, it was the first Baptist women's organisation to coordinate efforts of women across churches.[78] It did not send its own missionaries but supported the efforts of female

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[72] *SB*, 29 September 1908, 229.

[73] Many South Australian women who were not Baptists, took a similar path. See Martin Woods, 'Towards a Civil Society: Voluntary Community Service and Womanhood in South Australia, 1836–1936', (PhD thesis, Flinders University, Adelaide, 2000), 86-90.

[74] Buttfield, *So Great a Change*, 134-135.

[75] *BR*, 15 December 1928, 10. For the activities of other Baptist WCTU members, see *BR*, 15 March 1926 14; 15 July 1936, 13.

[76] *BR*, 15 February 1932, 12. Tibbits was one of the first signatories to the women's suffrage petition of 1894. See Jones, *In Her Own Name*, 161.

[77] On women and employment in South Australia, see Jones, *In Her Own Name*, ch. 9.

[78] *AB*, 27 September 1938, 4.

missionaries of the South Australian Baptist Missionary Society (later called the Furreedpore Mission) who ministered to Bengali women in their living quarters (zenanas). By 1909, the Ladies' Zenana Committee numbered forty, an equivalent size to the all-male general committee of the SABU.[79]

By the end of the First World War, many South Australian women, having contributed substantially on the 'home front' during the war , saw themselves as fully qualified to participate in the activities and opportunities of civic life.[80] Amongst Baptist women, this growing confidence resulted in a greater level of publicly expressed dissatisfaction about restrictions on women in church and denominational life. In 1925, 'Wondering' wrote to the *Baptist Record* criticising the failure of the SABU general committee to send any female delegates to the Australian Baptist Congress held in Adelaide. She asked: 'Did the Committee responsible for choosing the delegates think that South Australian Baptist women were only fit for 'Sowing and darning and feeding household sinners?" '[81] 'Perplexed', another female correspondent, declared: 'I think that SOME of the South Australian Baptist ministers are the most extraordinary human beings, and the Baptist women in South Australia, the most forgiving.'[82] In the light of the SABU's failure to appoint female delegates to the congress, she attacked N.L. Beurle's call for men to be allowed to attend 'View Day', a meeting intended specifically for women.[83]

Many Baptist women had two ambitions regarding their role in church life. They wanted a greater say in congregational and denominational life, and, continuing a well-established trend, they wanted to control their own organisations. The founding of the Baptist Women's League (BWL) in 1924 provided a vehicle for both. Modelled on the British organisation of the same name, it was established largely through the efforts of Mrs. Emily Benskin, a columnist in the *Baptist*

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[79] In 1910, the Zenana Committee was superseded by a new organisation, the Baptist Women's Missionary Union. Its object was to 'seek to make all our Baptist women missionary enthusiasts, and Baptist homes missionary homes'. By 1912, there were 32 branches. There were 72 churches in the SABU at the time. *SB*, 26 September 1912, 620.

[80] See Woods, 'Towards a Civil Society', 399-400.

[81] *BR*, 17 September 1925, 14.

[82] *BR*, 15 October 1925, 9.

[83] Beurle was minister of North Adelaide Baptist Church, 1921-31. In 1974 his daughter, Edith McKay, became the first female president of the SABU.

Record.[84] It sought to affiliate existing local women's guilds with itself and coordinate Baptist work among women. The BWL's goals included fundraising and supporting home and foreign mission efforts, extending hospitality to Baptist girls and women who had moved to another district, and assisting Baptist girls who were 'seeking situations'.[85] In addition, it undertook to cater for SABU functions. Although the BWL was integrated into the life and work of the denomination, it maintained its independence. It was wary of conceding its independence to 'the lords of creation', as it once critically referred to men, and refused to become one of the departments of the SABU.[86] If it had done so, it would have had representation on the SABU general committee, but would also have come under its control. However, the BWL did agree to appoint delegates to the half-yearly and annual meetings of the SABU. In 1927, the *Baptist Record* noted that with the admittance of BWL delegates to SABU meetings for the first time, 'woman's enlarged sphere would be recognised'.[87]

The BWL soon proved its worth to the denomination. It catered for assembly meetings; initiated a land scheme that resulted in purchase of a block of land on which the South Plympton Baptist Church was built; helped struggling churches with their finances and property development; and supported the work of two institutions in which the SABU had an interest, the Morialta Children's Home and King's College, a joint Baptist-Congregational boys' school founded in 1923.[88]

Something of the motivation for the founding of the BWL can be seen in an article entitled, 'The Women's League', written by Benskin's husband, Frederick, the minister of Flinders Street Baptist Church. He claimed that although Baptist churches were more democratic than others and were thus in accord with the spirit of Christ, they had not displayed that democratic spirit to women. 'Matters' he complained 'are

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[84] Modelled on the British organisation of the same name, it was established largely through the efforts of Emily Benskin, a columnist in the *Baptist Record* who was married to the minister of Flinders Street Baptist Church, F.G. (Fred) Benskin. Edith K. Wilcox, *The Baptist Women's League South Australia, 1924–1945: Twenty-One Years Record of Happiness Love Service*, (Adelaide: Baptist Women's League, 1945), 11.

[85] Hughes, *Our First Hundred Years: The Baptist Church of South Australia*, (Adelaide: South Australian Baptist Union, 1937), 245; *BR*, 15 July 1924, 9.

[86] *BR*, 15 November 1926, 9; 15 January 1924, 4.

[87] *BR*, 14 May 1927, 7.

[88] Wilcox, *The Baptist Women's League of South Australia*, 11-25.

so ordained [by men] that men hold supreme control'.[89] Furthermore, he claimed, women were not treated as persons in their own right as they were not elected to serve as deacons in local churches and were unrepresented on the SABU general committee. 'Has not the time come for a more consistent recognition of the position and service of women in our church life and organisation?', he asked.

Many women undoubtedly shared Benskin's views. The unidentified writer of 'Through a Woman's Window' in the *Baptist Record*, while maintaining that women's 'supreme sphere' was the home and that women should make the most of the 'home opportunity', encouraged women to take hold of the 'unparalleled freedom' they now enjoyed.[90] She urged them to take up the opportunities for the 'fuller development' of all their powers and to engage in educational, industrial, social and political life. Furthermore, she declared, 'let women not fail the Church, or the worst is near'. In urging this, the writer claimed that sport and business were capturing men. Her implication was clear: men were failing the church and it was up to women to rescue it. The writer also drew on widely held beliefs about the particular moral attributes of women, asserting that women brought to all their efforts a special quality; the 'power of inspiration'. She enthused: 'She can do things, it is true, but she can do better than that. She can create ideals. She can mould thought. She can inspire enthusiastic efforts.[91] These were the very attributes that women were thought to bring to the home. As Australian historian Judith Smart has written of Cecilia Downing, a Victorian Baptist 'first-wave' feminist, this type of approach to public life was a 'maternal citizenship' in which familial values were applied to society.[92]

At a local level, women's guilds catered for a range of needs and provided various opportunities for service. A report on the June 1938 meeting of the Norton Summit Baptist Church Women's Guild gives a good indication of the type of activities and emphases.

> The meeting took the form of an American tea. There was a good attendance of ladies present. We were very fortunate in having with us Mesdames Cousins, Phelps and Druce, from the city. The programme consisted of competitions and games, and solos were

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[89] *BR*, 15 January 1924, 4.
[90] *BR*, 15 January 1926, 9.
[91] *BR*, 15 January 1926, 9.
[92] Judith Smart, '"For the Good that We Can Do": Cecilia Downing and Feminist Christian Citizenship', *Australian Feminist Studies* 19 (Autumn 1994), 45.

> given by Mrs. Druce. Mrs. Cousins brought with her greetings from Mount Cooper, and greetings were by Mrs. Druce from the Prospect Guild. A very interesting address was given by Mrs. Phelps on the 'Good Samaritan'. Afternoon tea was served, after which ladies visited a jumble and sweet stall in charge of Mesdames Watkins and Spargo.[93]

Here were opportunities for spiritual uplift, friendship, fun, service and fund-raising. Addresses at guild meetings were rarely doctrinal but mostly inspirational or practical in purpose. Probably typical was a 'most interesting address' given by Mrs. A.W. Gordon at the Ladies' Guild of the Semaphore Park Baptist Church in 1938. Entitled 'Gardens and Flowers', it was said to contain 'much food for thought' because 'one cannot often realize how much joy flowers can give, especially to those who are shut in'.[94]

Although addresses such as this and other guild activities were often undemanding and would have posed little discomfort to the less religiously committed who might have attended guild meetings but not Sunday services, Guilds sometimes stimulated spiritual insight, deep relationships and sacrificial service.[95] In 1929, Mrs. D. Shaw, widow of the recently deceased minister of Georgetown Baptist Church, read portions of Second Corinthians chapters 5 and 6 to the assembled women of the ladies' guild. The *Baptist Record* reported:

> As Mrs. Shaw read she explained her reading, and from the depths of her bereaved and sorrowing soul she encouraged and comforted her hearers. Her talk was an inspiration and blessing. At the close of the meeting the opportunity was taken to present to our departing president [Mrs. Shaw was president of the Guild] a handbag as a token of love and esteem from the Guild friends.[96]

Barreira has claimed that women's guilds helped women make 'sense of daily existence' and provided 'a transcendent account of daily

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[93] *BR*, 18 July 1938, 18.

[94] *BR*, 18 July 1938, 19. Such sentiments were probably influenced by Romantic strains that were pervasive throughout society and in Baptist church life.

[95] Guilds, like other organisations that were a part of the institutional church, hoped to attract those on the fringe of the church and draw them more fully into church life.

[96] *BR*, 16 September 1929, 17. Presumably she read the portions dealing with 'groaning for a heavenly body', being 'full of courage', and 'patiently enduring troubles, hardships, and difficulties'.

living'.[97] The events at Georgetown Baptist Ladies Guild are a striking example of these things.

Apart from ministering to their own members in times of need, women's guilds also expressed their purpose of 'much serving' in many creative ways. At Brighton Baptist Church in 1929, for example, guild members held weekly sewing meetings in one another's homes over a six-week period. They remade 162 articles of old clothing into new garments 'warm and well made' for the 'poor and distressed'.[98] Fund-raising for causes such as local church projects, home and foreign missions, West End Baptist Mission, King's College, and the Morialta Protestant Children's Home were an important part of guild activities.[99] When a guild was able to report at its annual meeting, as did Southwark Baptist Church's in 1938, that 'a large amount of service [had been] rendered' and that there was 'a good credit balance', members believed that the guild year had been well worthwhile.[100]

Often guild members had little other connection to the church. To encourage the link between guild and church, most women's guilds held annual services and Mothers' Day services that were tailored to appeal to women. Women featured in the leadership of these services and often there was a female speaker and a women's choir.[101] There is no evidence, however, to suggest that guilds were successful in drawing many women into fuller church involvement. Nor did guilds have a strong evangelistic orientation. Guild reports to the *Baptist Record* were silent on these issues, focusing instead on service and other activities.[102] Guilds were an important part of local churches, but like other ancillary church organisations they were not oriented to winning the 'lost'.[103]

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[97] Paul Barreira, 'Protestant Piety and Religious Culture in South Australia, c. 1914 - c. 1981', (PhD thesis, Flinders University, Adelaide, 2003), 165.
[98] *BR*, 16 September 1929, 16.
[99] See the fund-raising activities of the various guilds listed in *BR*, 15 October 1934, 13-14.
[100] *BR*, 18 July 1938, 19.
[101] See, for example, the report of the Mothers' Day service at Richmond Baptist Church in 1937. *BR*, 16 June 1937, 18.
[102] For an exception, see the efforts of the members of the women's guild at West Croydon Baptist Church. *BR*, 15 September 1928, 19.
[103] This is not to deny that some women would have been converted or drawn into regular church attendance as a result of the friendships established in guilds. But guilds were not orientated towards winning the 'lost'.

Further Initiatives

By the end of the 1920s, the shape of women's involvement in church life had taken a shape that was to continue well into the 1970s. Nonetheless, there were several significant initiatives in the 1930s, one of which was to have international consequences. A meeting of women at the Australian Baptist Assembly in Adelaide in 1932 moved that the Baptist World Alliance (BWA) include a large number of women on its executive committee, and set up a separate international women's committee. In response, the BWA changed its constitution two years later to provide for up to five women to become members of the executive committee. A separate women's committee was also subsequently founded.[104] A similar request from the Adelaide meeting that women be included on the executive of the Baptist Union of Australia came to nothing. Australian Baptist women were still confronted with conservative attitudes regarding gender

Women also continued to exert themselves through their own organisations apart from the BWL. One that enjoyed wide support was the Senior Girl's Missionary Union, which was founded in 1925. This organisation, along with the Junior Girls' Missionary Union, formed in 1935, ensured that the next generation of Baptist women would remain strong in their support of foreign mission work. South Australian Baptist women, Edith Wilcox in particular, also worked with Cecilia Downing from Victoria to establish the Women's Board of the Baptist Union of Australia. This board, which consisted of representatives from around Australia, sought to coordinate the work of Baptist women and to 'bind together Baptist Women in a fellowship of prayer and service for the Kingdom of God in Australia and throughout the World'.[105]

The most radical initiative of South Australian Baptist women in denominational life in the 1930s was the establishment of the 'Baptist Sisterhood'. Edith Wilcox, the secretary of the BWL was its main proponent. In an address to the half-yearly meetings of the SABU in 1936, she outlined the history of the Sisterhood (sometimes called Deaconess) movement in Britain and elsewhere, and differentiated the role of Sister from that of deaconess as then existing. She envisaged the Sisterhood as being a band of mainly young women who would be willing to 'give their time and talents to the smaller churches or other spheres of service in the homeland, much on the lines of overseas

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[104] Basil Brown, *Baptised Into One Body: A Short History of the Baptist Union of Australia*, 49.

[105] Brown, *Baptised Into One Body*, 49-51; *BR*, 19 September 1938, 3.

mission service'.[106] What Wilcox proposed was a kind of filling the gaps approach: there were not enough men to do the work, therefore women should be called on. At one level this was a cautious proposal designed to win the approval of the SABU. She was not proposing that the Sisters displace male home missionaries or pastors. At another level, it extended the range of opportunities for women. Wilcox hoped that Sisters would not only be able to serve as assistants to ministers in well-established churches, but that they would be able to serve as pastors of new or struggling churches. She probably hoped for even greater opportunities for women in the future.

Wilcox presented her initiative as a response to the call of Christ to extend his kingdom, but chose to justify it on pragmatic rather than specifically biblical grounds. She pointed to the need for more workers in the field and the success of the deaconess (Sisterhood) movement in other parts of the world. She further argued:

> When we see the work women are doing in other spheres – doctors, lawyers, matrons of hospitals, almoners, and in our city offices capable, clever, trained women meeting one at every turn, we realise that there is a wealth of womanhood working in the various spheres. Why not use them also in God's work, in the field of Home Mission activity?[107]

Wilcox's arguments proved convincing. In 1938 the SABU approved the establishment of the Baptist Sisterhood and in the early 1940s three Sisters were appointed. In 1943, one of these, Margaret Sinclair, who had trained at the Melbourne Bible Institute, became the pastor of a small, struggling Baptist church in the working-class suburb of Hilton. Although unordained, she was the first woman to be appointed as a minister of a Baptist church in Australia.[108]

Conclusion

Contemporary beliefs about gender roles and femininity both limited and increased roles for Baptist women in the last third of the nineteenth century. Beliefs about specialisation that derived from the Enlightenment and entrenched interpretations of the Bible's teaching on gender

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[106] Edith Wilcox, 'Concerning Deaconesses', typescript unpublished manuscript currently in my possession but to be deposited in the State Library of South Australia, 1.
[107] Wilcox, 'Concerning Deaconesses', 4.
[108] Wilcox, *The Baptist Women's League of South Australia*, 18.

relations often made it difficult for women to move beyond the home sphere, although a mix of biblicism and pragmatism opened up new opportunities for women as deaconesses and missionaries. The relative egalitarianism of Baptist church polity also provided opportunities for Baptist women that were denied to women in more hierarchical denominations. Baptist women such as Rosetta Birks and Lilian Mead challenged prevailing perspectives on women's suffrage as well as the education of women and Baptists women formed and controlled their own organisations. Nevertheless, Baptist women and men alike continued to believe that the home remained the principal sphere of endeavour for women. They believed that mothers had a vital role in shaping the character of their children and through them the future development of society.

By the 1920s some Baptist women were becoming increasingly frustrated by entrenched male attitudes and formed the BWL partly to give Baptist women a stronger voice in denominational affairs. In 1938 this more assertive attitude led to the formation of the Baptist Sisterhood and eventually to the appointment of Margaret Sinclair as the pastor of Hilton Baptist Church. As the efforts of women like Edith Wilcox demonstrate, many Baptist women sought to broaden the definition of Christian womanhood. In doing so, women contributed significantly to the life and mission of local churches and to the SABU. In the process, many women found Christian community, guidance and spiritual comfort.

Baptist women creatively explored what it meant for them to have a 'holy liberty in the Lord'. Nonetheless, despite the introduction of Sisters and the appointment of one non-ordained female pastor, definite limits remained on what a woman could or could not do in church life. Indeed, no South Australian Baptist woman was ordained until 1981 when Judith McAllister became the third Baptist woman to be ordained in Australia. Ultimately, entrenched attitudes constrained the ways that Baptist women could express their liberty in the Lord.

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