

Being the Household of God at Footscray

*(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on May 33rd, 2022, the 139th anniversary of FBC)
[John 14:23-29 & Acts 16:9-15]*

God will make his home amongst the people who keep his word says Jesus. When Lydia in Macedonia, already a believer, met with Paul and his group by the water where she gathered with others, she listened to what he said and she and her whole household – relatives, slaves, children were baptised and then she invited them into her home and served them.

This is what characterizes the household of God – keeping his word, listening to others, gathering to worship and serving each other.

Folks, we are part of the household of God here in Footscray and have been for the last 139 years.

As we celebrate these 139 years of faith and witness in this place I thought I would just give a brief overview of our history.

1. Founding Years

Footscray Baptist Church grew out of the ministry of the West Melbourne church. On May 1st 1883 the church was constituted with 18 members. They met in various halls in the district before purchasing a site and moving to Paisley Street in 1890. It's first minister had recently arrived for the United Kingdom, Rev A Soper,

2. Goble Era

In 1895 the church appointed Rev Joseph Hunter Goble as pastor, he had served the church previously as a student pastor, he was ordained as a Baptist Minister in 1900. As the suburb grew, so did the reach of the church and its 'branches' under Goble's leadership. Branches, that would become churches in their own right at Gordon Street, Yarraville, Kingsville, St. Albans, Sunshine and Altona. During this time the church had the largest Sunday school in Victoria. The church was extended a number of times to accommodate the growing numbers. Goble was well known and loved by the local community, evidenced by the erection of his statue on Geelong Road and the windows in this church commemorating his service. He served until his death in 1932 and was known as both the Good Samaritan of Footscray and the Bishop of Footscray. He would meet people on the street and know what was happening in their lives, he would pay bills for people who could not pay, he took the same wage as his fellow workers and not the larger wage he was entitled to, he involved himself in the denomination at the state and national level. These were difficult years – World War 1 followed by the Great Depression. He rode his bike to complete his pastoral tasks and preached up a storm. Not bad for the son of a single mum who knew poverty and started work as a printer's assistant and who loved the Footscray Football team.

3. Middle Years

The church was characterized from then until 1977 with those things that most churches had – sporting groups (tennis, cricket, basketball, badminton), a choir, boys and girls groups, women's fellowship groups. As the suburb changed and Australian culture changed the church did not live up to the Goble Era. However, many faithful pastors and parishioners sat in this place praying for each other, the community and the world and witnessed to the love of God.

4. Western Suburbs Report

In the late 1970's Ross Langmead authored a report looking at the Baptist witness in the region. The report recommended that the churches in the Footscray area should collaborate and in 1980 a senior pastor was appointed to oversee 6 churches. At this time the Footscray church came close to closing.

5. The beginning of the Multicultural Era

In 1990 there was some renewed enthusiasm when Rev Nardito Manalang arrived and began to gather around him some Filipino believers, thus growing the congregation and marking the beginning of the multicultural era.

6. The era of multiculturalism & inclusion

From 2001 there was a deliberate attempt to become a multicultural hub under the leadership of some of my friends – Rev Rainer Schack, Ron Ham, Khanh Do, Ed Ditaro and Marcus Curnow. There was also a ministry to the poor in the area. During this time our inclusive mission statement was developed –

The Footscray Baptist Church celebrates the God-given diversity of cultures. We welcome you to join us in the journey of faith, whatever your race, religion, capability, gender or sexuality.

By now people from the Philippines, the Pacific, Africa, India and Asia were worshipping at the church. This continues to this day and we have been joined by our Persian brothers and sisters and our Kachin church which meets here.

You have in the last decade or so called four women as your interim and permanent pastors.

7. What's next?

More recently we have begun to reach out to the poor and vulnerable in our community linking with Orange Sky, Houses of Hope and a new playgroup for vulnerable families.

So, that is a little of our heritage. Early on the people of the church noted that they had much to give thanks for and to take courage. Now have the opportunity to live out the vision of our predecessors to be:

- people of courage
- the Good Samaritans of Footscray
- a place of inclusion
- a place where our unity and diversity is celebrated
- a people who involve themselves with the civic life of the area, who will we befriend? Will it be those we meet on the street or live and work beside us? Who will we be engaging and sharing the love of God?

Happy 139th birthday!