

Four—  
Hundred  
Years

400

The History of the  
Baptist Church

Anniversaries are significant moments in life. They're an opportunity for looking back and giving thanks, and also for looking forward with renewed focus.

2009 is a significant year for the movement of Christians, called Baptists, as we commemorate the 400th anniversary of the founding of the first Baptist Church. From a small group of English "dissenters" who fled persecution to the more tolerant climes of Amsterdam, the Baptist movement today is the largest Protestant communion in the world.

We've actually had quite a journey, and as the children of Israel would often ponder and give thanks for the forebears, we too have much to give thanks to God for.

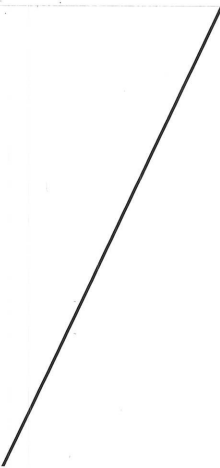
There are many significant milestones in the Baptist story over the past 400 years. Australian Baptist Ministries (the new name for the Baptist Union of Australia) is grateful to Dr Richard Moore for this concise insight into how Baptist Churches have come into being and what they have sought to do.

Of course, having looked back on our history we then must turn and face the future opportunities ahead of us. We don't live in the past, but it helps us understand our foundations and challenges us to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom all the more boldly. The best is yet to come . . .!

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Australian  
**BAPTIST**  
MINISTRIES





*Baptists are one of the largest and most widely-distributed Protestant denominations across the world today.*

*They are also one of the oldest.*

*Unlike most other denominations, their beginnings are not associated with outstanding leaders—such as Luther or Calvin or Wesley—who have left an indelible stamp on their spiritual heirs.*

*On the contrary, the earliest English leader and his American counterpart each moved into other religious contexts just a matter of months after commencing a Baptist church. Yet from small beginnings the Baptist movement has grown steadily, even under conditions of persecution.*

# One—

## Beginnings: British Baptists

Their story goes back 400 years to 1609, when a group of about 40 English exiles formed the very first Baptist Church, in Amsterdam. They had migrated to Holland in order to have the freedom to worship in the way they believed to be right.

Their leader was John Smyth. He had trained in both theology and medicine at Cambridge University. Initially Smyth served as a minister in the Church of England, where his loyalties were with the Puritan party (which desired to further 'purify' the Church). Before long, however, he left to pastor a Separatist Church. During this period he came to know Thomas Helwys, a wealthy landowner in the same area.

With the increasing persecution of those outside the State Church, Smyth and Helwys decided to migrate to Holland. About 40 in their congregations accompanied them. It is probable that Helwys helped to fund some of the travel costs and accommodation in their new haven.

Early in 1609 Smyth baptized himself, then Helwys and others of the congregation and formed the first Baptist church. (The baptismal mode was affusion, i.e., by the pouring of water over the head or body.) Within months, Smyth came to regret this action. He and about 30 of the congregation made application to join a local group of Anabaptists, the Waterlander Mennonites. It was to be five years before they were finally accepted (1615). By this time Smyth had died (1612).

Thomas Helwys and about 10 others disagreed with Smyth's change of heart. They continued their congregational life until 1612, when they returned to England. At Spitalfields, just east of the wall surrounding London, they formed the first Baptist church on English soil.

The year they returned Helwys published a short declaration of the mystery of iniquity (London, 1612), a book appealing for complete religious freedom.

One copy (which still survives) contained a special dedication and appeal to his sovereign, King James I. Helwys's subsequent fate is unknown to us, apart from the fact he was arrested and had died by 1616. In spite of the restrictive laws in force, the infant Baptist cause grew steadily.

By 1633 a second, quite independent, Baptist work had come into being. The two groups differed in their understanding of the significance of Christ's death. The earlier group were known as General Baptists as they believed Christ died for all; the later group, the Particular Baptists, were Calvinistic and held that Christ died only for the elect. The practice of baptizing by immersion was introduced in 1642 by the Particular Baptists under Continental influences. It soon became universal among both groups.

In the following centuries the Particular Baptists had the greater numerical strength. By 1891, however, the differences in theology and practice between these two groups had become insignificant, and they merged.

Meanwhile, with a forced change of monarch and the passing of the Toleration Act in 1689, Baptists and other dissenting groups were at last free to worship according to their consciences. Even so, they still lacked many basic rights: it would take several centuries before Baptists could attend Oxford or Cambridge Universities and enjoy other citizenship rights still denied them even after the 1689 reforms.

# Two— Baptists in North America

Three decades after Smyth and Helwys had established the very first Baptist church in Holland, a Baptist church was founded in New England on the north-east coast of what is now the United States of America (1639). At this time, the New England settlements were British colonies; ties with the mother country were firm, and England's influence strong. Yet colonization did afford a measure of independence. Massachusetts, New England, where the Pilgrim Fathers had settled in 1620, was a case in point. Denominationally they were Independents (Congregationalists) with whom Baptists shared a great deal in common. However, once these Independent colonists had settled in Massachusetts, their form of the Christian religion became the established denomination for the area they controlled no less than Anglicanism was the established denomination in their country of origin!

One settler in this area, Roger Williams, had arrived as a Separatist minister. When he spoke out strongly in favour of the separation of church and state, he soon found he was no more free to hold such views in Independent Massachusetts than he would have been in Anglican England.

Expelled from the colony, Williams moved south where he purchased some land from the local Indians in the area now known as Rhode Island. There he set up a new colony in which all were free to practise their religion according to conscience. After coming to Baptist convictions regarding baptism and church membership, he and a small group of others sharing his convictions founded the first Baptist church on American soil at Providence, Rhode Island (1639). After only a few months Williams left the newly founded church, eventually joining the Seekers.

The policy of freedom to practise one's religion according to conscience received a further boost in this part of the continent when the Quaker, William Penn, founded the colony of Pennsylvania, with its capital Philadelphia.

It was here, towards the end of the seventeenth century, that a number of English and Welsh Baptists settled and formed churches. They were Particular Baptists by conviction. In 1707 five Baptist churches in this region cooperated to form the Philadelphia Baptist Association. They maintained strong links with England and fostered the Baptist cause cooperatively, especially in the areas of missionary endeavour and ministerial training.

Soon after 1725 Baptist churches in these British colonies began to grow rapidly. This was the beginning of the First Great Awakening which lasted until around 1860. A second wave of growth occurred during the American Revolution (1775-1783), during which the United States established their independence from Britain (1776). Baptists were prominent in establishing the American Constitution (1787), and especially the First Amendment (1791), which guaranteed religious liberty for all. A third period of rapid growth occurred during the Second Great Awakening from late in the eighteenth century to early in the nineteenth.

This growth helps, in large part, to explain why the USA is the nation with the largest Baptist constituency today.

A significant step towards denominational organization was taken in 1814, when the Triennial Convention was formed. Behind this event lies the remarkable story of Adoniram Judson and Luther Rice, and their wives, who set out for Burma as Independent (Congregational) missionaries, only to come to Baptist convictions on baptism as they read their New Testaments during the long voyage. En route to Burma the Judsons called to see William Carey in Bengal, and were baptized by immersion as believers. Rice soon returned to America where he became a tireless advocate for the Burma venture, which now became the first overseas missionary outreach of Baptists in the USA.

As the nineteenth century progressed and passed into the early decades of the twentieth, further developments took place in denominational organization to establish the prevailing pattern. While there are over thirty different Baptist conventions in the USA today, the largest four account for the majority of Baptists. They are, in order of membership, (1) the Southern Baptist Convention (1845); two Afro-American Conventions: (2) the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc. (1915) and (3) the National Baptist Convention of America (1895); (4) the American Baptist Churches (1907).

# Three—

## The Vision Of World Mission

The situation in Britain contrasted sharply with the advances made in the USA. Even though the British Act of Toleration of 1689 enshrined many of the ideals to which Baptists had aspired, during the next eighty years or so their fortunes were on the decline. The General Baptists suffered large losses to the Quakers and the Unitarians, while the Particular Baptists retreated increasingly into a rigid Hyper-Calvinism, which militated against evangelism.

Although the General Baptists on the whole resisted the revival of vital religion represented by John Wesley and George Whitfield, they were given a new direction through the New Connexion of General Baptists organized by the former Methodist, Dan Taylor (1770).

For the Particular Baptists renewal was also facilitated by the Evangelical Awakening. Notable among their leaders were Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) who summed up his views in *The Gospel worthy of all acceptance* and the notable preacher, Robert Hall (1764-1831). They helped lead the Particular Baptists out of Hyper-Calvinism to a broader and more balanced Christian witness. The influence of William Carey (1761-1834), a fellow minister and close associate of Fuller, was crucial for establishing the Particular Baptist Missionary Society (1792), of which Carey was the first missionary (to Bengal in India) in 1793. Carey's influence went far beyond the Baptists, and for good reasons he has been dubbed 'the father of modern [Protestant] missions'. Another Baptist minister, Joseph Hughes (1769-1833) was instrumental in forming the British and Foreign Bible Society for the dissemination of the Scriptures (1804) and became one of its three founding secretaries.



# Four—

## The British Empire

Just as Baptist churches spread to the British colonies in North America, so they spread to other parts of the British Empire.

The first Baptist church in Canada was formed by a Briton who emigrated from Massachusetts to Nova Scotia (1763).

In South Africa a Baptist witness goes back to c.1820 when a number of members from Joseph Ivimey's church in England arrived among four thousand settlers at Cape Colony.

Although British settlement in Australia commenced in 1788, it took over four decades before the first recorded Baptist service was held in Sydney, New South Wales, on 24 Apr 1831. It was conducted by Rev. John McKaeg, a Scottish Baptist minister. McKaeg suffered from an alcohol problem. Within a few years he was obliged to leave the congregation he had been pastoring. An urgent request to the Baptist Missionary Society in England resulted in Rev. John Saunders coming to the colony to take charge in 1834. Saunders brought stability to the situation and helped place the Baptist cause on a firm footing. He formed the first Baptist Church in NSW in 1836.

Meanwhile, the same year that Saunders arrived in Sydney, the Rev. Henry Dowling, also from England, arrived in Tasmania. The church he formed in the capital, Hobart, in 1835 was the first Baptist church in Australia.

Unlike New South Wales and Tasmania, which were convict colonies, South Australia was an experiment in free settlement. In time its capital city Adelaide would gain a reputation as 'the City of Churches'. Here nonconformity, including Baptists, flourished. The first Baptist church had been formed in Adelaide in July 1838, but the rapid growth of the Baptist

denomination in South Australia dates from the foundation of a second Adelaide church pastored by a young Englishman, Rev. Silas Mead, who came to the Flinders Street Baptist Church (1861).

In Victoria Baptist services were held from 1839, but it was 1842 before the first church was formed. The central city church was formed the following year under Rev. John Ham, erecting its chapel in Collins Street in 1845.

In Queensland Baptists at first joined with Congregationalists and Presbyterians in the United Evangelical Church. The first Baptist church there was formed in 1855.

With the formation of the Perth Church in 1895, Western Australia became the last of the Australian colonies to receive a permanent Baptist witness. In New Zealand the first Baptist church was planted at Nelson by English missionaries of the Baptist Missionary Society (1854).

# Five— Baptists Around The World

Baptist work in the Middle Americas goes back to 1782 (a decade before Carey's Enquiry). George Liele, a freed slave from the United States, arrived in Jamaica that year and was able to form the first Baptist church late the following year.

The earliest Baptist witness on the continent of Africa came about through the leadership of David George. Towards the end of the American Revolutionary War (1775-1783), the British had repatriated George, formerly a slave, from South Carolina to Nova Scotia in Canada. There he became pastor of an Afro-American congregation. Meanwhile, in 1782 the British government had established Sierra Leone as a refuge for former slaves. In 1792 George and his congregation migrated there, settling in Freetown.

Meanwhile, missionary activity led to the Baptist cause being established in various parts of Asia: William Carey (India, 1793); Adoniram Judson (Burma, 1813); Timothy Richard (China, 1870).

The establishment of Baptist churches in the various countries of Europe was largely a phenomenon of the nineteenth century. In Germany Johann Oncken came to Baptist views in 1834 and spearheaded a vigorous movement which saw churches planted not only throughout Germany but also in neighbouring countries (Austria, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, Switzerland, Belgium, The Netherlands, Denmark, Poland, and Russia).

South America saw the first Baptist church established in Brazil in 1871 and in Argentina a decade later.

# Six—

## The Baptist World Alliance

The worldwide spread of Baptist churches was one of the chief factors leading to the setting up of the Baptist World Alliance in London (1905). . It developed a pattern of five-yearly congresses held in various venues around the world with its President appointed for a five year term. By a series of commissions it sought to research issues of interest and significance for Baptists and through its presidential team, secretariat, agencies, and publications to make an impact on justice-related issues in needy areas around the world, especially those affecting Baptists. For more than half a century Baptist World Aid and its predecessors have been providing assistance to needy areas of the world. It is a growing field of endeavour.

By 2009 the combined membership of bodies associated with the Baptist World Alliance stood at over thirty-seven million baptized believers, with a community of 105 million.

# Baptist Distinctives

Baptists may be defined as those who hold in common a set of core values. These values are not necessarily their most important beliefs, but they do serve to distinguish Baptists from other denominations in regard to values for which Baptists feel a God-given responsibility to witness to the universal church and the wider world. Many denominations share one or more of these values, but Baptists embrace them all.

## ***1. The inspiration and authority of the Bible***

*The Bible is divinely inspired and the supreme authority for all matters of faith and conduct.*

## ***2. Regenerate church membership***

*Membership in Baptist churches is only for those who have made a profession of faith in God through Christ, and whose lives give evidence of that faith.*

## ***3. Baptism of believers by immersion***

*The theology and practice of baptism is to be derived from the New Testament and consists of the immersion of believers in the name of Christ or the Trinity. Baptism is important not because it is essential for salvation, but because it is commanded by the Lord. It is a means of identifying with Christ, and symbolizes his death and resurrection.*

## ***4. Congregational government***

*Given the priesthood of all believers, the ultimate authority for a local congregation rests with the congregation*

*itself, not its leaders or external authorities. On a range of enterprises, such as theological education and overseas missions, local congregations benefit from working cooperatively with other like-minded congregations in assemblies, associations, or conventions.*

## ***5. Separation of Church and State***

*While God authorizes both churches and governments, he has done so in such a way that each has its own distinct mandate and authority; these are not to encroach on each other.*

## ***6. Religious liberty***

*Historically, Baptists have pioneered religious liberty for all people. They reject all forms of coercion, whether by the State or other authority. Each person is to be free to practise religion according to their own conscience.*

## ***7. The Gospel for all the world***

*God's people have a duty to make the Good News about Christ known to the whole world.*