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The Australian Baptist Heritage Collection: implications for the management of geographically distributed special collections[1]

Kerrie Burn

In this paper I hope to provide both a snapshot of the work that I am currently undertaking and also a brief outline of my particular journey in becoming a research student.

My research topic, titled *The Australian Baptist Heritage Collection: implications for the management of geographically distributed special collections*, was largely conceived within my own theological library context. The Baptist Heritage Collection Project had been commenced at Whitley College in 2003 with a view to organising the resources that we already had, articulating a collection development policy, and subsequently developing our Baptist resources into a special research collection. The Baptist resources to which I refer are publications by or about Australians who identify themselves or are identified by their affiliation with the Baptist Christian community in Australia. The works are mainly theological in orientation but not limited to this subject area. Most of the material has been published in the public domain although the project also seeks to incorporate private material deemed to be of significance.

Although theological library networks are very active within Australia and New Zealand, these networks do not tend to be very well known within the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) or the wider Australian library community in the same way as other existing special library networks such as Law or Health libraries. The Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association (ANZTLA) has an annual conference (its 20th held in Sydney in 2005), active chapters in each state, a web-site and list-serve, and has formed a consortium for the purchase of several online databases. It has over the years produced a number of significant publications for the theological library community. These include a regular *ANZTLA newsletter (1987-)*; *Australasian religion index* (1989-) - an index to articles and book reviews published in over 80 Australasian religious and theological journals; a union list of serials (McCumstie 2002); a style manual for works in religion and theology (McIntosh 1994); a set of *ANZTLA standards* (2000); and a festschrift in

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honour of the former Chief Librarian of the Joint Theological Library in Melbourne (Harvey and Pryor 1995). ANZTLA Librarians often come from one-person or small library environments and librarians who only participate in their theological library networks can often experience some degree of isolation from the wider library community. Seminars such as RAILS are therefore a great opportunity for feedback from practitioners in the wider Library and Information Management sector.

Where it all began….

Whitley College, where I am currently the senior librarian, is a residential college of the University of Melbourne. It is also a theological college for the Baptist denomination in Victoria. The College currently has around 130 residential students and 250 theological students enrolled in a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate courses. A relatively small number of these theological students would be on a pathway towards ordination and to becoming ministers in the Baptist Church. Most students are studying out of general interest and come from a variety of backgrounds and work environments. Degrees are awarded by the Melbourne College of Divinity (MCD), an ecumenical body that was established by an Act of the Victorian Parliament in 1910. The MCD has been affiliated with the University of Melbourne since 1993. However it still retains its autonomy and degree conferring status and in 2001 was listed as a Schedule 1 Higher Education Institution by the Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST).

Whitley College, formerly the Baptist Theological College of Victoria, is the oldest Baptist theological college in Australia (established in 1891) and has one of the largest collections of Baptist resources in the country. In my role as custodian of our Australian Baptist resources I became interested in finding out exactly what material had been already written by or about Australian Baptists. Initially this was for collection development purposes, so that I might acquire resources that we didn't currently have in our collection.

In April 2004, the MCD awarded me a small grant, which enabled me to travel to all of the other Australian Baptist theological colleges, in Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth. The primary purpose of these visits was to liaise with the librarians, archivists and historians who manage the Baptist collections in each of these cities. Another aim was to gain access to possible rare or uncatalogued resources that may not be available via the libraries' websites. Indeed, when I started my research, not

all of the libraries even had an online catalogue so site visits were a necessity in order to ascertain their Baptist holdings.

At the same time as this project was taking shape, on a personal level I was interested in enrolling in a Masters program so that my project would count towards something. I also wanted to broaden my area of research so that it would be of relevance to the wider library and information sector as well as to Baptist or other denominational institutions. In 2004 I explored a large number of options to determine which institution I might undertake my research through. I took rather a broad approach initially, investigating a number of library and information schools as well as Australian history or religious studies departments around the country. The responses I received to my initial expressions of interest at each institution were quite mixed, from one institution telling me that nobody does bibliographies for a Masters anymore, to several others who went to great lengths to encourage me.

At the same time as I was investigating institutions I was also seeking funding support so that I might be able to reduce my workload and potentially be able to work full time on my research. In September 2004 I was awarded the ALIA YBP/Lindsay & Howes Research Award for Collection Services and in December 2004 I was also awarded an Australian Postgraduate Award, which has provided me with a scholarship for my Masters in 2005/6. These have been great opportunities and I would encourage others to investigate all of the grant or other funding options that may be available to them.

The final outcome for me has been that I eventually enrolled in an MA by Research through the Melbourne College of Divinity. As part of my Masters with the MCD I have also been able to take a unit in Digital Libraries through Curtin University of Technology. I have two supervisors, Dr Ken Manley who is an Australian Baptist historian and Dr Paul Genoni who is a lecturer in the Department of Media and Information at Curtin University. This combination takes into account the cross-disciplinary nature of my research topic and so far has worked exceptionally well.

Getting down to business….

The first stage of my research involves the identification of publications by and/or about Australian Baptists and the subsequent compilation of a comprehensive bibliography of these Australian Baptist-related resources. There have been a number of different sources of bibliographic data. Initially records were imported or

manually entered into *EndNote* from online library catalogues. Significant publications in the area have also been a source of bibliographic data. These have included *The national guide to Australian Baptist historical resources and services* (Parker, 1998) and a bibliography from the draft version of a soon-to-be-published book on the history of Australian Baptists (Manley 2005). The guide contains sections for each of the states and the Northern Territory with additional sections for the two national bodies, the Baptist Union of Australia and Global interAction (formerly the Australian Baptist Missionary Society). It is a valuable reference tool, which lists many publications, includes a list of all Baptist serials held by Australian libraries, and provides details about the various archives, historical societies, and other relevant bodies that hold material related to Australian Baptists.

Personal visits to all of the Australian Baptist theological college libraries[2], state archives and/or Baptist historical society collections then provided access to rare, uncatalogued and/or previously undiscovered items and an opportunity to liaise with collection managers. Site visits also involved the documentation of all Masters and PhD theses by students and faculty at each of the institutions. Holdings information has been incorporated for each item in the bibliography and this will help in determining significant or unique items and those potentially at risk. The National Library of Australia and some state libraries hold significant Australian Baptist resources and, where appropriate, holdings information for these libraries has also been included in the bibliography. Contact with the various librarians, archivists and historians around the country has resulted in being more accurately informed about the exact nature, scope and content of Baptist collections held in each state, and developing an understanding of the collection development strategies of each institution and their available facilities and services. This information, along with a history of the Baptist collections in Australia, provides the formal context for the bibliography.

The bibliography has now grown to include approximately 1000 items. As the project progressed I decided that there was a need to define the scope of the bibliography and to exclude some formats or categories of item. So the bibliography now consists primarily of print material in English, particularly monographs and periodical holdings. Items such as audiocassettes and video material have not been included. The optimal arrangement of material in the final publication has been decided upon after

[2] Apart from Whitley College in Melbourne, other Baptist theological colleges visited included the Queensland Baptist College of Ministries, the Baptist Theological College of Western Australia, Burleigh College, South Australia and Morling College: the Baptist Theological College of NSW.

surveying a number of similar bibliographies, including a Canadian Baptist publication (Griffin-Allwood, Rawlyk and Zeman 1989), the *New Zealand bibliography of religion and theology* and a bibliography to Congregationalism in Australia (Lockley 2001). As well as a traditional alphabetical-by-author format, the bibliography includes a breakdown of resources according to subject area which would be useful for researchers as well as those interested in the publication from a collection development point of view.

***Australian Baptists: a Bibliography* - Why is it important….**

An Australian Baptist bibliography will be the first Baptist publication of its kind in Australia. While Baptists in Australia have always remained a religious minority, internationally the Baptist World Alliance represents a community of approximately 110 million people who are associated with over 210 Baptist unions and conventions throughout the world. In Australia, Baptists have often exerted public and institutional influence far beyond their demographic percentage of the population. From renowned and prolific author F.W. Boreham[3], to the contemporary contribution of the Costello brothers, Tim and Peter[4], Australian Baptists have contributed significantly to the ingenuity, culture and spirit of this country. The bibliography will be a significant reference resource and collection development tool, of interest both nationally and internationally to students, researchers and librarians interested in Baptist history and theology. It will document items in library, archive and historical society collections around Australia that are related to Australian Baptists that may otherwise be inaccessible to researchers. It will be of particular interest to organizations such as the Baptist World Alliance and the various Baptist colleges, archives and historical societies within Australia and overseas.

What I have discovered….

- A significant amount of material has been written by and/or about Australian Baptists. This material includes general histories, Baptist church histories and biographies as well as literature for children, theses and many items addressing various social issues and concerns. Subject areas covered include biblical studies, ministry, education, missions, ecumenism, worship, pastoral care, social justice, reconciliation and spirituality.

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[3] F.W. Boreham was a much-loved Baptist minister who published over 50 books and wrote approximately 3000 editorials for the *Hobart mercury* and the *Melbourne Age*. He wrote one each week between 1912 and 1959, not missing a week in over 47 years!

[4] Tim Costello is a high profile Australian figure who at the time of this publication is the CEO of World Vision Australia. Peter Costello at the time of this publication is the national treasurer.

- Most Australian Baptist collections within theological colleges and archives operate on only limited staffing levels and/or exist largely because of the labours of passionate volunteers. This has resulted in a huge variety of cataloguing standards and inconsistency in the way that bibliographic information about each item has been recorded. This has necessitated checking the hard copy of as many items as possible for the sake of accuracy in the final published bibliography.

- A large amount of material, particularly of an historical nature remains uncatalogued or not available online and therefore remains largely inaccessible to researchers.

- Time and funding are also in limited supply, making the systematic development of collections, digitisation initiatives or other collaborative projects difficult to commence and manage into the future.

- Custodians of collections have been extremely helpful, often drawing together resources from within their collections and making them available when I visited.

Outcomes for the Australian Baptist community….

The initial outcome of my project is the publication of an Australian Baptist bibliography. Another outcome is the establishment of a list of librarians, archivists and Baptist historians who are interested in the subject material of my project. From this small network comes the opportunity to contribute to improved relationships between the custodians of Australian Baptist collections and to promote the development of future cooperative and collaborative ventures between the various institutions. My aim is to develop a set of recommendations for possible future directions, projects or further research. I hope that the results of my research might encourage members of the various Australian Baptist organisations to consider collaborative projects that would advance the purposes of all Baptist institutions both individually and collectively. This may include outcomes such as the development of a national collaborative collection development policy which includes appropriate conservation and preservation strategies; the development of a website with links to all of the collections; the sharing of duplicate resources; and the encouragement of

those responsible for Baptist collections to add their holdings to the National Bibliographic Database. One particular outcome of the project will be the creation of an order of priority for the conservation and/or digitisation of unique or at-risk resources. Online availability of resources is an important strategy to ensure the preservation and availability of valuable heritage material, giving more people the opportunity to learn about Australian Baptists and their place in Australian history and society. Many items in the bibliography relate to a time in Australia's history when formal religion played a much more significant role than it does today. Ensuring Australian Baptist materials are preserved and made available ensures that the lived experience of these Australians is available to future researchers.

Australian Baptist heritage materials are geographically distributed around the country. Several Australian states have their state Baptist Archives affiliated with their state theological college and there are obviously many potential advantages of such an arrangement. Other states have separate premises for archive and theological college collections. While many churches have handed over their records to their state union archives, some individual churches, particularly the larger and longer established ones, continue to maintain their own archives or indeed hold part of the archives of the various state Baptist unions. Some states also have significant Australian Baptist heritage materials in their relevant State Library or located at one of the university libraries. In particular, resources are held at the Mortlock Library of South Australiana (State Library of South Australia), the Mitchell Library (State Library of New South Wales), the John Oxley Library (State Library of Queensland) and the University of Tasmania. The National Library of Australia's holdings includes books, newspapers and biographical clippings files on many Australian Baptist figures.

My research will investigate the benefits of bringing geographically dispersed special collections together (as in the integration of Baptist state theological college and archive collections) and also investigate some of the challenges and issues that need to be addressed before such mergers occur. The wider Australian theological community, which includes many other denominational and religious collections, may also be able to participate in some of these proposed co-operative ventures. It is also anticipated that information about Australia's Baptist Heritage Collection and the bibliography would be linked to the Baptist Heritage pages of the Baptist World Alliance website (www.bwa-baptist-heritage.org).

Outcomes for the wider special library community….

Although initially based on work with Australian Baptist resources, this project also has broader implications for the theory of collection management. This project will enable me to develop specific expertise in the area of managing geographically distributed special collections and to develop and trial policies, management strategies and methodologies for collection development. These initiatives will also be broadly applicable to other library and information environments, particularly special library collections that are distributed around the country or even the globe. The cost of maintaining several discrete collections for many organizations is increasing in terms of both personnel and space. This drives the need for increasing shared collection management strategies across geographic boundaries and a greater reliance on document delivery to the desktop. Questions to be addressed in my research include how digital technology might be used to facilitate the sharing of collections and the maximising of access to significant and rarely held material. My hope is that the published results of this research will be a resource to inform best practice for all organisations dealing with issues related to the management of their geographically distributed collections.

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