

# The Westralian Baptist

Ross M. Woods, Nov. 2023

## Abstract

This article considers the role of the *Westralian Baptist* in recording the history of Baptists in Western Australia. It first asks about the balance between primary sources and analysis, and the emphases and gaps of the journal. It then briefly looks at some implications.

As a journal, the *Westralian Baptist* carries much of the burden of recording the history of Baptists in Western Australia, although some local churches have also written their own histories. It not only keeps past articles as a permanent record, but allows expansion through the addition of more articles on any topics relevant to its purposes. The journal allows writers to select topics based on their own interests and does not follow a grand plan of coverage of Western Australian Baptist history. For some topics, it is perhaps the only work that has ever been done. In other topics, it is a record of information that would have otherwise been lost and is now probably unavailable elsewhere.

In this review of the journal, the questions were “What is the balance of primary sources and analysis?” “Are there major emphases and gaps?” I went through all past copies in the Morling library (some were missing), categorised them, and counted the number of occurrences in each category, as shown in Table 1 further below.

Some categorisations are rather arbitrary. When an article fitted into multiple categories, it was put into the category that was the best fit. The interview with Max Wells (Vol. 1.1) was categorised as an autobiography of a prominent figure, but could have almost as easily been categorised as a biography of a prominent figure or a church growth study. The article on Christian Endeavour (Vol.16.1) was classified as a reminiscence but it was also a specialist ministry.

The biographies of some prominent figures are almost equally studies of the institutions they led.

One of the most interesting categories was “Other/miscellaneous.” It included the history of specialist ministries (Baptist schools, camping, WA Baptist historical studies), and specialised topics such as women in ministry and the effects of World War I. It gave freedom to examine topics that might not have been feasible in a more restrictive view of the journal.

Even when people wrote of their own experiences, such as Sue Clark’s article on her husband (23.1), the articles are a combination of the author’s own memories and of information derived from other sources. In these cases, each author wanted (quite rightly) to present a factual basis as well as a personal memoir. That is, these articles contain both primary and secondary sources, which is the way that future historians will be able to review them.

The widest glaring gap in the *Westralian Baptist* is the lack of local church histories; it has no articles on many WA Baptist churches. Richard Moore’s monographs (1991, 1996), do much to fill this gap, but a monograph cannot by nature represent the views of multiple writers.

Another particular gap is that existing articles generally do not answer the central question: “Why are we doing this?” The question “So what?” haunts researchers in almost every field of enquiry. In other words, will any particular good come out of this research? Would we be

any worse off if we did not do it? Writers need to be consistently able to answer this question.

Most, but certainly not all, articles represent the institutional church. However, Baptist churches are congregational and church life is often at the grass roots level in ordinary members. This does not feature in institutional histories, so the journal would benefit from more original personal stories.

The journal also generally needs more analytical and interpretive articles, because it has sought to emphasise factual information. Readers know more “what happened” than “why” and “how.” It might be easy to answer some “why” and “how” questions, but others are much more complex. For example: “Why do some churches grow when others die?” “Which topics are no more than historical curiosity and which are instructive for the modern church?” “How and why does change occur in Baptist churches?” “Are there healthy and unhealthy patterns of change?”

The interest in factual information brings another problem of method. Writers seldom tackle a topic once it has been done, because, it seems to be assumed, we now have “the facts” and no longer need to discuss it. It would be better if papers generated discussion instead of closing it down. For example, a historian could compare two or more separately written reports on the same topic, confirming some notions by corroboration and examining differences.

While the journal cannot sow discord, the nature of the historian’s task is to explore different interpretations and apply new interpretive frameworks and tools as they arise. Consequently, the journal cannot dwell only on the harmless and irrelevant, and shy away from the significant. A good example is the article on churches that have closed down. (9.3) It might be an unpopular view of the past, but still very necessary.

### Conclusion

The kinds of articles currently published should of course continue. However, the Westralian Baptist has scope for other different kinds of articles.

It should encourage writers to repeat topics and produce articles from different perspectives. The journal needs a wider variety of people producing their own stories, especially people stories. In some cases, writers have the opportunity to re-examine “facts” and historical methods. The journal should deliberately encourage articles of a more analytical nature, even if (or especially if) they allow alternative interpretations of the past.

Finally, the journal should deliberately encourage articles that modern Baptists will find instructive, helpful, and even compelling.

	<b>Category</b>	<b>Number of occurrences</b>
1	Biographies of prominent figures	16
2	Autobiography of prominent figures	3
3	Reminiscences	1
4	The institution of the Baptist Union	2
5	Church growth	12
6	History of local churches	5
7	Not related to Western Australian Baptists	7
8	Other/miscellaneous	6

Table 1: Articles in the Westralian Baptist

### References

- Moore, Richard K. 1991. *Baptists of Western Australia: The first Ninety Years (1895-1985)* (Perth, W.A.:The Baptist Historical Society of Western Australia)
- Moore, Richard K. 1996. *‘All Western Australia is my parish’: A Centenary history of the Baptist Denomination in Western Australia (1895-1985)*. (Perth, W.A.:The Baptist Historical Society of Western Australia.)