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Gordon Stirling : Service and Inspiration

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Historical Digest

Historical Digest is the quarterly journal of the Australian Churches of Christ Historical Society and it's the ideal place to share stories of our movement. What kind of stories? Stories which strengthen us as disciples, stories which bring chastening awareness of our past and cast light on our future path, stories which unite us in the much bigger story of God's life-changing love – they are all part of *Historical Digest*. You're invited to send *your* photos and stories for publication or archiving – church histories, anniversary celebrations, biographies of people who made a difference, histories of objects, rituals and ideas in Churches of Christ.

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From the editor

Gordon Stirling was a life member of the Historical Society and a great supporter. He believed in Churches of Christ as a movement and promoted our ways and reasons for being, serving as Federal and Vic/Tas State President and in so many other capacities. He was widely admired for his ability to get to the heart of the matter in disarmingly simple, intelligent prose – and his sermons and books made faith real and credible. We honour him in this special double-sized issue of *Historical Digest* as a man of extraordinary energy who encouraged, inspired and pointed many of us in the direction of the Kingdom of God. What follows are 15 heartfelt tributes from people who served alongside him in ministry - from his first church in New Zealand in the 1930s to his ministries at Boronia (Vic) after 'retirement'.



Since Gordon died in December 2010 at the age 96 there has been an outpouring of grief at the loss of a great minister. But, despite the admiration expressed here and elsewhere, we remember that Gordon Stirling was not Churches of Christ's 'saint'. He was an exemplary disciple, but he was also a son and a father, grandfather and great-grandfather, and beloved husband of Lesley. And so, acknowledging the generosity with which the Stirling family have shared Gordon and their long involvement in Churches of Christ, the first tribute comes from his grandson, Mark Butler.

Kerrie Handasyde

Service and Inspiration

Tributes to Gordon Stirling

STIRLING FAMILY

from Mark Butler

Some years ago now, Gordon gave me a box of old books from his substantial library. I'm a bit ashamed now to admit that most of them ended up in our loft storage. I did, however, retrieve one. It was a very old book written by Dr Leslie Weatherhead, called *The Transforming Friendship*. The catalyst for my sudden interest in this book was that Grandad shared with me that this book had a significant influence on his faith in his early years. I retrieved it because I wanted to read, for myself, the words that had helped shape such a remarkable faith.



Weatherhead begins his book by describing the remarkable transformation experienced by people [expressed as 'men' in the days before equality] who found themselves in the presence of Jesus...

"Why? Rarely did condemnation pass those gentle lips (unless men were religious hypocrites or cruel to little children); but in His presence men felt their inner, better selves suddenly revived within them. Jesus lifted up men's hearts. He saw all their dormant possibilities. What is more, He made men see them, and, what is more still, He made men desire, with a deep and passionate

longing, that those possibilities should actualize, and His dreams for them come true; He made men believe that they could come true. His utter sincerity made men see their own insincerity, and instinctively turn from it with loathing and contempt. He made men want to be like Him; and when He talked with them, men felt that likeness to Him had suddenly become possible, and that life would never be true or beautiful till they set this goal definitely before them."

As I read on, I began to understand why my grandfather exuded such a profound faith. He knew what it was to have this transforming friendship with Jesus. He knew it and, furthermore, he lived it. In his own life and ministry, through his love of people, he became an influence for their transformation, as he brought out the best in them. Even now, six decades later, people in South Australian Churches of Christ love to regale me with tales of the impact that Gordon, as the Youth Director, had on their growth as followers of Jesus through his ministry with them in their youth.

Despite my determination to set my own path in ministry, I cannot deny the significant impact my grandfather has had on the person and the minister that I have become. I long ago realised that I could never be like him. I was not capable of his unshakable optimism and positive thinking. I could only marvel at his ability to see good things in and say good things about even the most difficult of people. His ability to exude joy, even when the chips were down, simply staggered me. Yet, I happily looked to him as a mentor and example for ministry, and appreciated his guidance, never imposed, but only offered when asked for. Whilst I have always fallen short of the ideal, his simple but profound advice to *'love your people and visit them often'* has been a foundational aspiration for my own ministry and that of many others who had the privilege of learning about ministry from him. I must add, in his defence, that he claims he

never added the words '*and you can get away with anything...*' to that piece of advice, despite having been frequently quoted that way.

All this, I know, makes Gordon sound rather super-human, which, despite any childhood mythology I may have developed, we know he was not. In later years, I had the privilege of seeing his more vulnerable side. After the death of my grandmother in 1997, I learned just how close they were as soul-mates and loving companions, and just how much he missed her each and every day. I remember a road trip I took with him from Melbourne to Adelaide, to attend a Theological Education Conference. It turned out that, just before my grandmother was admitted into care, her dementia having become so profound, Grandad decided to take her on one final holiday to Adelaide. Our trip, just a few years later, not long after her death, became a story-line of his grief, as he narrated his memories of that last holiday together. For me, this was a story and example of the true courage of a husband utterly devoted to his beloved wife. I remember his tear-filled eyes that night, when, after I clumsily commented on how much I missed Nicola after just one day apart, he responded; 'Well just imagine how it feels for me to be apart from Lesley'. Even so, I marvelled at the way in which Grandad faced this profound loss with dignity, courage and that characteristic optimism, sustained by his faith in Jesus who he knew as his friend and comforter. I can only hope that, if faced with such loss in the future, I can call upon his example to shape how I respond.

In the last few years, as his body has failed to keep pace with his mind, I have seen Grandad struggle to maintain that same courageous optimism that was so much a mark of his character. Despite his decades in ministry, there was always a remnant of the stockman in Grandad – the determined independence and self-sufficiency formed in the hardships of his early adult years earning an income on the land. Over the last few years, as this once strong

and upright man became more frail and stooped and was denied the ability to do the things he loved to do - to read and write and spend time with people – those of us close to him began to hope that he would not linger in misery or pain, but that he would be allowed the gift of a peaceful and dignified death.

Some weeks ago now, after managing to spend just a few days of his 96 years in an aged care facility, Grandad was transferred to hospital and died peacefully a few days later. We will all miss him deeply - of that there is no doubt. In our sadness and loss, though, we cannot help but feel an enormous sense of gratitude to God for the gift Grandad was to us as his family, for his example which will ever endure in our own lives, and for the many many wonderful memories of his life with us – a life of humour, fun, grace and love.

Mark Butler is State Minister and Chief Executive Officer for Churches of Christ in South Australia

NEW ZEALAND

Minister at Lower Hutt, at Palmerston North, and Youth Director for New Zealand Churches of Christ 1936 – 1945

from Ian W. Ogier

My earliest memory of GRS was of him taking a service at Palmerston North prior to being called there. His Children's Talk was about 'Bill Stickers' and I remember it to this day. His first church in New Zealand was at Lower Hutt, in the Wellington area, where he came as a fresh graduate from the College



of the Bible, Glen Iris. He had to wait a year for his fiancé, Lesley Carnaby, to complete her College course and come to be married. Two children were born at Lower Hutt and the third in Palmerston North. The Church at Lower Hutt soon grew under his ministry and evening services were especially crowded.

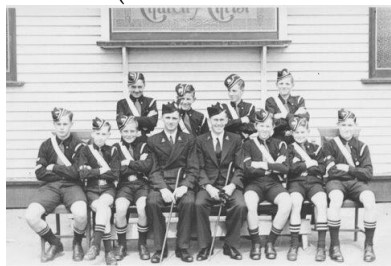
While in the Wellington area GRS studied for his Bachelor of Arts degree at Victoria University. In his book, *Life of Tertius*, he described the place as the 'headquarters of New Zealand rationalism'. He was a little apprehensive at meeting his lecturers because he thought 'these great academics would have powerful and convincing arguments in support of their positions. But he soon discovered that these positions were also based on faith, faith in a worldview that happened to appeal to them'.

In 1939 GRS moved to Palmerston North to a growing church which soon saw increases in attendance at services and prayer meetings. Youth work needed an impetus so he set out to establish Boys' Brigade and Girls' Brigade Companies: the BB in 1940 and GB in 1941. They still continue today and there are many who look back to GRS with gratitude for introducing them to good foundations in life. While at Palmerston North World War 2 broke out and restrictions soon set in. Blackouts were needed and all church windows were covered for evening services or meetings. One Sunday evening while walking to the evening service, GRS came upon an altercation between a young woman and a rather inebriated soldier. He intervened and was rewarded with a swift blow to the head. The soldier was spirited away by friend and GRS was able to make his way to church. I can remember one of the elders starting the service while the blood was being removed from the minister's forehead so and he could preach his sermon as usual.

By 1941 the New Zealand Churches were in need of a new Youth Director and GRS was chosen for that role. He moved back to Wellington and began a memorable ministry among the youth of our

churches. He conducted youth leadership courses throughout the country. He visited continually with practical help for churches in their youth ministries. There were large attendances at Easter Youth Camps. GRS edited three publications: *The Quest*, a monthly paper for young people, full of helpful teaching and suggestions for programmes; *The Religious Education Quarterly* with even more practical matters and articles on youth ministry and young peoples' needs aimed for youth leaders; and the annual 'Youth Week' souvenir study. He lead Happy Hours, which were after school programmes held in church halls, with the aim of building up Sunday School numbers. It worked. His years as Youth Director were a highlight for our churches.

It was with regret that New Zealand Churches farewelled GRS in 1945 when he returned to Australia and youth directorship in South Australia. He left behind many friends and especially young people who had developed in their faith under his leadership. His links with New Zealand were not completely severed, as he returned on a number of occasion through the years for special occasions. The Home Mission Committee asked him to lead a series of training sessions for men in an endeavor to establish men's fellowships in the dominion. Some churches called him to conduct short mission ventures (one such was at Palmerston North in 1967).



In 1991 the Palmerston North Church invited GRS to the city to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Boys' and Girl's Brigade companies. The girls had maintained an unbroken record while the

boys had a period when no parades were held because of lack of leadership. Several men and women who were foundation members of the companies attended the celebrations. Fred Hollows, the eye surgeon who became Australian of the Year, was one of them. (See photos above.) Then, in 2005, GRS was invited back to share in the Centennial of the Palmerston North Church. At 92 years of age he preached the sermon at the Sunday Service to a crowded congregation.

Gordon Stirling left an enduring legacy among our churches and, as one who was baptised by him in 1939, I treasure the ministry I received as a teenager under this multi-gifted man.

Ian W. Ogier is a retired minister, former President of Churches of Christ in NZ and former editor of *The New Zealand Christian*.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Youth Director for SA
Churches of Christ 1945 –
1953

From David Whyatt

I met GR when I was in my early teens. It was at a Sunday evening Youth Service at the Colonel Light Gardens church and I can still recall him as that bright minister who captured the attention of all present and who showed us a film on the Youth Department's 16mm movie projector. I met him again at Easter camp at Gawler in 1951. I was rather fed up with the church at that stage and was 'sent' to the camp. GR and the leaders



made such an impression on me there, that a couple of weeks later I 'made my decision' and thus started a long contact with him.

Then there were the monthly meetings of the Adelaide Christian Youth Fellowship (ACYF) at Grote Street church, where we had lots of bright singing, enjoyable artists, interesting speakers and always finished with a film, followed by milkshakes at the local deli. There were also the Christmas Camps at the Tanunda oval where we joined in with the local Lutheran church services, played cricket against the locals, held an open air Sunday night church service in the main street of Kapunda and participated in many other interesting activities. The last Tanunda Camp in 1952 was a very memorable one. The day before Christmas we stacked the little Fordson panel van ('Lizzie') to the roof and then, somehow, two or three of us fitted in the back and twice bounced all the way to Tanunda to set up. We went back to Adelaide afterwards for Christmas but, as I recall, the Stirlings stayed at Tanunda keeping guard on the Camp.

When it was announced that the 1953 Easter Camp could not be held at Gawler, all us young people pitched in with GR and many older people from the churches to build a meeting hall and toilet blocks on the newly acquired land at Longwood. We hoped it would be ready for the Easter camp. In ten weeks the buildings were completed, electricity and water were connected from the bottom of the property and all the tents erected to house over 200 young people for a very memorable camp. Meals had to be staged in two sittings and on the second night we had a huge storm with several inches of rain. The tents leaked and so the girls were housed in the hall while the boys made do with tents within leaky tents. All through this GR kept up his true leadership qualities.

GR organised many other activities which we young people looked forward to. Two that I recall were 'Lizzie's Letter' in the monthly edition of the 'Fellowship News' and a monthly Tea Club at which

we had interesting and challenging speakers. He had a compassionate understanding of what it was to be young - I remember him telling me about deciding to send a boy home from a Boys' Brigade Camp for continually misbehaving but, when he remembered some of the thing he did in his youth, the lad was allowed to stay.

Like so many other South Australians, I appreciated and admired GR's seemingly boundless energy, his captivating nature, his willingness to answer our questions even if it was not the answer we wanted, his simple and clear way of preaching, his time for anybody and everybody, his practise of his Christian faith and his humanity.

GR's influence will surely live on for generations to come.

David Whyatt is archivist for Churches of Christ in SA

from Gerald Rose

We never called him Gordon – certainly not back in 1950 when I first met him. I can't remember if I met him at a Christmas camp at Tanunda or an Easter camp at Gawler but, whenever it was, I was struck by two things. First of all there was the moustache – Clark Gable-ish, neatly trimmed, very fashionable and just so amazing to find on a minister. But then, GR was not like the other ministers I had met in my short time as a young 16 year old convert to Churches of Christ. The second thing, and even more striking, was the incredible energy and charisma of this dynamic man. There was just something very striking about him. I was soon to learn that his infectious personality was fueled by a zest for life and a keen mind that was willing to think beyond traditional constraints and was prepared to take risks that pushed boundaries. He stretched our minds with a vision of the Kingdom of God big enough to keep us inspired and working at its realisation for the rest of our lives.

Here are just a few examples of how he did this. I have vivid memories of GR at a Christmas camp at Tanunda expounding on the critical theory of the Old Testament and immediately making sense of my puzzling experience of reading Genesis as a young teenager. It was going to be a while before I found another minister who could make such good sense of Scripture. GR fueled my life-long love of Biblical exposition.

The training classes that GR ran on Christian Youth Leadership in one of the back halls of the Grote Street church hall is another memory. The one thing above all that I learnt was that if we were going to work with young people, then we had to love them and believe in them even though they would let us down many times over. Our commitment was to love them beyond their failings. We learnt that not just from what GR said. We learnt it interactively because that was the way he related to us.

Then there was the wild and noisy kids 'Happy Hours' that he ran at the dozen or more new church ventures (we call them 'church plants' today) that were springing up like mushrooms in the new housing suburbs around Adelaide. Most of the new Churches of Christ that were founded in the late 40s and early 50s in Adelaide were started from a Sunday school. When GR was appointed as Youth Director in 1945, Sunday School attendance was at a 40 year low. When GR left for Canberra in 1954 they were at an all time high, having increased by nearly 2000 scholars (Taylor 1960: 69). And then there were the weekend trips to churches with him in 'Lizzie', the youth van – a vehicle that can only be described as 'basic'.

Somehow, GR talked the churches of the South Australian Conference into buying the Longwood campsite in the Adelaide Hills at a time when money was in short supply and risk-taking among the churches even shorter. That campsite soon became a magnet for the young people of our churches. In many ways, the

camps that GR ran there laid the foundation for the next two generations of leaders for our churches in South Australia. Those camps also became the first step for quite a number of us on our journey to the College of the Bible, Glen Iris, and full time service for the Kingdom.

I still have vivid memories of spending a hot January in 1953 with a bunch of other young men who were either students at COB or who, like me, were on their way there. We spent that month building the main assembly hall at Longwood. We built it with logs cut from the pine plantation on the property and galvanized iron sheeting that GR had managed to ferret from somewhere in those days of acute shortage of building materials. I am not sure what was more green, the logs we used for corner posts and roof trusts, the bunch of young guys trying to do the constructing, or GR's building supervisory skills. But the building went up and stayed up until replaced in the early 1980s.

That old hall at Longwood was rudimentary; boiling hot in summer and freezing cold in winter. But it became a nerve centre for our work throughout the State. It somehow epitomised GR's enthusiasm, vision and ability to make something out of some pretty raw material. And I think that is what he did with a lot of the young adults who were drawn to him like the proverbial bees to a honey pot. For us, both the building and GR the person became the stuff of legend.

GR introduced Boys Brigade and Girls Brigade to our churches in South Australia and we, 'GR's boys' as 'Mrs GR' called us, were all soon enlisted and learnt how to do drill and tie knots like the best. In terms of strategy for growing churches in the era of the post-war 'baby-boom' GR provided us with a model that worked. It was simple; 'get the kids and the parents will follow.' And they did!

I have no idea how GR managed to do it all. He seemed to be everywhere. If he wasn't visiting churches all over South Australia

and inspiring leaders and Ministers with his visions of possibilities, he was running the monthly Saturday night Youth events, writing Sunday School materials, running a regular radio program, training teachers and youth leaders and inspiring us that the Kingdom was really worth giving everything for.

GR's vision was never a narrow one. It was broad and embracing. He, along with Eric Hollard and a coterie of other young ministers, turned our churches in South Australia around from an often introverted and at times dogmatic collection of Christians that thought everyone should do it 'our way'. They created from those churches an accepting and vibrant movement that made a real contribution to communities by making them better places to live in. They were better because a Church of Christ was there.

GR had a way with him that was well informed but down to earth and somehow he knew how to gear his message to where his hearers 'were at'. His explanations were often deceptively simple, belying the depth of thought that lay behind them. For me, along with many others, he was the encourager, the model I wanted to emulate. Sometimes he was the challenger who knew the painful experience of marrying an enquiring and wilful mind to the down-to-earth demands of ministry that require us not to get too carried away with our own grandiose ideas. He would say something like 'Remember, your people are good people who in their own way have a real love for God, but they are simply people who have jobs to do and families to look after. Just love them.'

Somehow, despite all the demands on his life and through all that he managed to achieve, GR always seem to be able to do exactly that – he just loved and respected us. And in that, we found not just Gordon, but God.

Gerald Rose is a retired minister and former President of Vic/Tas Conference.

CANBERRA

Minister at Ainslie
Church of Christ 1954 –
1968

from Kevin Bray

AB 'Banjo' Paterson
ends his famous poem
this way: *'And down by
Kosciusko.... [and] around
the Overflow...., the man
from Snowy River is a
household word today, and the stockmen tell the story of his ride.'*



Gordon Stirling is probably the only person within Churches of Christ in Australia for whom such an acknowledgement is equally appropriate, and no more so than in the national capital, where he ministered for nearly 15 years, from early 1954 to late 1968. Memories of Gordon remain strong in Canberra. On later visits, well into his nineties, he could still draw an appreciative, attentive audience, including some whom the church hadn't seen much of since Gordon left, but who remained attracted by his magnetic personality. They turned up in droves when Gordon was guest speaker at the 50th Anniversary of Ainslie Church of Christ in 2001!

Gordon's ministry in Canberra was spectacularly successful and the reputation he deservedly won here was unquestionably the basis for his subsequent national role within and beyond Churches of Christ. One could demonstrate Gordon's successes in Canberra in terms of statistics alone: growth in church membership (by no means all of which was due to Canberra's rapid population increases then as public servants were progressively transferred to Canberra); massive Sunday schools and youth, men's and women's programs (by today's standards); his practical, on-the-job training of members in

all ways required to support active, expanding ministries; and his down-to-earth preaching and pastoral styles.

But what of the man himself? Several examples characterise Gordon's energy and capacity to utilise simple strategies for God's work – and to do so with grace, humour and humility. As a newly arrived minister, keen to let Canberrans know of the Ainslie Church's open doors and to point to some distinctive aspects of Churches of Christ, long before photocopiers, he wrote a welcoming, handwritten letter that was widely distributed within the ACT with the help of his congregation. In those early days, he included a regular 'What We Believe' section in his column in the church newsletter, covering in plain words Churches of Christ positions on issues such as Christian unity, speaking the truth in love, our attitude to creeds, why we call ourselves Churches of Christ, the importance of the scriptures, baptism, communion and why an 'invitation' is usually given in Sunday night Gospel services.

In those days, when afternoon home calls were still an important way of meeting members and others, Gordon developed a highly organised 'system' based mainly on evening calls, so that he would be pretty sure his visits would find their 'targets' at home.

Gordon was not slow to recognise the particular interests, experience and skills of his members and he wasted no time in urging the use of those gifts in furthering the ministry of the church. One of Gordon's greatest strengths was his unfailing capacity for positive, encouraging reinforcement of the special worth of everyone he met. In Canberra, no-one could say 'no' to Gordon! He also could be creatively tactful. When one male member – in the days when it was still rather unseemly or daring (depending on one's personality) for men to wear shorts to church even in the heat of summer - presided at 'The Lord's Table' in what would have been quite revealing even on the beach, Gordon's response was not censure, but merely to

arrange for that gentleman to henceforth be rostered to preside only in winter!

Gordon was loved and respected by many whom we never saw at our church. He attended the courts and stood simply and practically with many in trouble. Many years after he and Lesley had left Canberra, the son of a near neighbour with no obvious church connection spoke of the Stirlings' practical, unconditional support for his less-than-well-off mother and family.

When it became imperative for the Canberra church's property to be expanded, Gordon persuaded the then Federal Conference Executive to endorse a national fund-raising campaign, in which Gordon travelled to all States, carrying a model of the proposed new chapel complex and succeeding in attracting a generous national response.

Gordon was an enthusiastic promoter of establishing a 'sister' Church of Christ in the mid 1960s in the rapidly developing Woden Valley – the Lyons Church of Christ with Richard Lawton as initial minister – with strong financial, leadership and spiritual support from Ainslie, which subsequently morphed into the ACT Conference as other congregations developed.

Ecumenically, Gordon was a true (and practical) believer in our church's longstanding 'plea' that 'they should all be one' and was active with all churches in Canberra in many ways – in contributing to Christian media input, in encouraging the work of the 'Joint Commission on Church Development' as Canberra's highly planned new suburbs were emerging, and in supporting the initial moves to establish a new residential college at the Australian National University under the auspices of Canberra's churches (he helped raise funds for this from the then Campbell-Edwards Trust of Churches of Christ, and the ANU's Burgmann College has a 'Campbell-Edwards Room' which is still well used today).

To conclude this brief account of Gordon's time in Canberra, a quotation from the church newsletter which illustrates his theology of ministry: *'A visitor was looking over the building. I told him of our expanding work and he said 'You'll need an assistant soon.' 'We've already got assistants', I replied. He seemed surprised, so I told him 'We have over 150 assistants in this church. They work, they pray, and they tell others. In our church, we believe that every member and attender is a minister.'*

Dr Kevin Bray is treasurer at Ainslie Church of Christ and has served on Churches of Christ's National Council, ACT Conference, and the boards of CCTC and ACCIM.

**COLLEGE
OF THE BIBLE
(NOW CCTC)
Vice-Principal and
Lecturer in Practical
Ministry 1969 – 1981**



from Bill Tabbernee

Gordon Stirling and I arrived at the College of the Bible at the beginning of 1969: he as the new vice-principal and I as a student. I was immediately enthralled by this distinguished man with his impressive mane of gray hair and wealth of pastoral experience. He taught us not only how to preach, conduct worship, and balance local church budgets but to be fully engaged in the lives of those to whom we minister.

Gordon's approach to the education of ministers was pastorally oriented. He was your minister as well as your teacher, your mentor as well as your colleague. He was passionately interested in you, your family, your interests, your church, and your ministry. He wanted to know if what he taught you in class really worked as you put it into practice in the local church.

In his preaching class, GR introduced us to the concept of dialogical preaching, a concept popularized by Reuel L Howe's book *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* (New York: Seabury, 1967). Ever eager to try something new, I convinced Jack McCormack, the senior minister at Ivanhoe Church of Christ, to let me try such a sermon with him. I was the student minister there at the time. The experiment proved disastrous as the way I had structured the dialogue sermon made members of the congregation think that the senior minister and the student were having a public argument, rather than preaching the gospel. When I sheepishly reported the fiasco to GR, he helped me to see that the point of dialogical preaching was to get the members of the congregation involved in the preparation and evaluation of the sermon – not to make them uneasy and anxious by watching a theological debate. In my enthusiasm for the new and the 'dramatic', I had forgotten to 'love my people'.

A few years later, as a very junior faculty member, I came to appreciate how timely and vitally important GR's appointment as vice-principal of COB was. The early 1960s had brought about great changes in church and society and people were questioning not only the relevance of Christianity but the necessity of institutions such as COB. 'Conservatives', on the one hand, considered COB 'too liberal' in terms of theology. 'Radicals', on the other, viewed COB as 'too conservative' in terms of social action. Both groups tended to discourage potential students from enrolling.

Gordon Stirling, who doggedly continued to 'love his people' (whether theologically conservative or politically radical) set about to develop a church relation and recruitment plan. Highly respected among the churches and trusted by both sides of the theological and cultural divide, GR, with carefully chosen deputation teams of other faculty members and students, patiently made the case that COB provided exceptional, relevant theological studies and ministerial formation. On one such deputation trip, I made the mistake of publicly referring to the latter as 'ministerial training'. GR gently reminded me privately that one *trains* dogs, but *educates* ministers!

Gordon's profound respect for the dignity of all human beings impacted all he did and the way in which he taught us to treat those whom we serve. It has been a privilege to have had GR as a teacher, mentor, colleague, and friend. I can still hear him say, 'Love your people – no matter what!'

Dr William Tabbernee is a former Principal of COB/CCTC (1981-1991) and lecturer in Church History

from Ken and Norma Clinton

Gordon had amazing energy, compassion and commitment to the College. He brought a new perspective to faculty meetings when students were discussed. Always ready to see the good and believe in the best, Gordon championed, supported and coached those who were struggling. The Chapel was filled with his wisdom as he took preaching classes; the Dining Room was the place for stories that brought colour and humour to ministry; the Lecture Rooms were alive with discussion, illustration and life as pastoral care was taught and caught; the Vice-Principal's office had walls that could tell stories of pain, struggle and despair – companioned and guided into hope.

All this and he still had energy for administration, weekend ministries, denominational committees, writing tasks, deputation and mini-missions to all the States of the nation. GR – a gift we experienced and value still.

Ken Clinton is a former lecturer in Hebrew Bible at COB/CCTC

from Alan Niven

For many of us at College (and long afterwards) GR was always an unofficial ministry supervisor, not only in one-on-one conversations but also through his lectures. There was always a strong sense of immediacy, relevance and sheer commonsense in all that he said or did. His practical and dynamic faith meant that the Jesus who inspired the first disciples came through his life and teaching to inspire new generations of disciples. He was the first at College working bees and the last to leave. The details for Graduations, Garden Parties and Inaugural Services were safe in his hands and his welcome to such gatherings made all feel welcome and somehow special. A Gordon Stirling mini-mission in your student Church kept you busy with follow-up, pastoral care and baptisms. I love my ministry because GR gave me a balanced vision of service.

Dr Alan Niven is Vice-Principal of CCTC and lecturer in Pastoral Studies

from Stephen Curkpatrick

Gordon Stirling (GR) was a wonderful teacher of ministry practice and leadership. He gave much clear and practical guidance from his wide range of ministry experiences—guidance that we constantly resorted to in our ministries. Above all, Gordon presented ministry as a privilege, challenge and joy in which the gospel can be engaged in faithfulness by ever-new expression—a constant theme in GR's lectures. We experienced the immediacy of this in the sheer force of

GR's intelligent enthusiasm—which launched us into ministry with anticipation and gratitude. As we encountered Gordon at conferences, ministry and college gatherings over the years, he continued to be an interested listener and wonderful mentor, which complemented our first impressions of him as a teacher over thirty years ago. Gordon Stirling was and continues to be a wonderful gift to us all in Churches of Christ and beyond.

Dr Stephen Curkpatrick is lecturer in New Testament and Christian Thought and History at CCTC

from Merryl Blair

Gordon spent a lot of energy, in my first year at COB (1979), trying to convince me that I was called to pastoral ministry. This was not even vaguely on my horizon at that time, and I was rather amused by his transparent attempts to sway my thinking - 'Merryl! I saw your father in you, up behind that pulpit!', after a preaching class, for example. Of course, years later when I entered ministry, Gordon was far too gracious to say 'Nyeah, nyeah, told you so!', but he let me know on many occasions, by word or card, how proud he was of me. He moved seamlessly from teacher, to mentor, to peer, to student, happily asking me to use my specialised knowledge to fill in gaps for him. This highlights one of his outstanding character traits: curiosity. He always assumed there was more to know, and that wisdom and understanding could come from any place or person. Gordon was one of the most fully engaged people I have ever known, right to the end of his long life.

Dr Merryl Blair is lecturer in Hebrew Bible at CCTC and former President of Vic/Tas Conference

THE AUSTRALIAN CHRISTIAN

Editor 1979 - 1988

from Geoff Alves

When he 'retired', Gordon Stirling became editor of *The Australian Christian* for nine years. In those years Gordon built up the number of subscribers, mainly through the force of his own personality. It was hard to say 'no' to Gordon Stirling.



I joined the staff in 1989. A regular column in *The Christian* was entitled 'Letters from Tertius'. I thought that now I was on the inside the identity of Tertius would be revealed to me. No way. Every issue Chris Ambrose, the sub-editor/manager, would pull out a manilla folder full of letters from Tertius. Tertius wrote lots of letters in advance, and we would select one to go in each time. The typing was atrocious and covered with corrections.

One day an article arrived from Gordon Stirling. Aha! The same dreadful typing, the same multiple corrections! When I pointed this out to Chris, all he said was, 'Fancy that'.

In 1993 Tertius decided to reveal his identity to all (though not until page 172) in his autobiography, *Life of Tertius*. I was privileged to edit and produce this book and a young friend of my nephew's, Daniel Changer, did the wonderful illustrations. Fortunately, Gordon's daughter, Beth Butler, typed the manuscript! Beth has now produced a sequel to *Life of Tertius*, with all proceeds going to the Fred Hollows Foundation.

Geoff Alves is a former assistant editor of *The Australian Christian* and former editor of *Christian Conference of Asia News*

from Chris Ambrose

Gordon Stirling commenced as Editor of *The Australian Christian* (AC) in May 1979 following retirement from his ministry as Vice-Principal of the College of the Bible. The position of editor was advertised (along with the role of sub-editor/manager) and applications received. Some of the Board had discussions with Gordon about the possibility of his taking over the editorship but he was reluctant to undertake the role full-time. He lived in Boronia at the time and the office was then at the North Essendon church, a journey of over one hour across Melbourne. Following discussions, Gordon was appointed as part-time Editor. He would write a leading articles and be ultimately responsible for all content. He would also spend time travelling around churches promoting *The Australian Christian*. I was appointed on a full-time basis with the responsibilities of financial management, putting together each issue and ensuring that it was distributed.

Practically this meant that Gordon wrote a regular column (Page 13) which acted as an editorial page. He saw letters to the editor and other articles that I believed needed his perusal and wise consideration prior to their publication. He also wrote articles about churches and events that he attended in his promotional role. In reality Gordon saw around 85% of *The Australian Christian* for the first time when his copy arrived in the mail. He was extremely gracious and trusting in my ability to not “rock the boat too much”. Most of our work together in producing *The Australian Christian* was either by mail or by phone conversation.

One of the principal reasons for appointing Gordon to the position of Editor was his positive character and distinguished position within Churches of Christ around Australia. Gordon’s freedom to travel meant that he deliberately targeted areas and states where the AC was less well known and accepted, countering the perception of it as a Victorian publication. Gordon was probably the only person in

Churches of Christ at the time who could bring the various streams within our movement together. Whilst he had a definite theological position, because of his accepting and generous spirit he was able to share across some of the divisions within Churches of Christ. Through the pages of *The Australian Christian* Gordon and I sought to bring unity to the differing aspects of our movement so that together we could be a force for God in Australia.

Gordon's positive attitude and his commitment to Churches of Christ principles shone through in the articles that he wrote for *The Australian Christian*. His Page 13 contribution regularly looked at contemporary ideas that were prominent in Churches of Christ. He was also very positive about the churches that he visited and featured in his articles. Gordon was also extremely efficient at promotion and persuading people to take out a trial subscription. During this period the circulation was often over 5,000 copies and peaked at about 5,200 subscribers. From the limited records available in the office at the time, it appeared that this was the greatest number of subscribers in its history.

For more than 30 years Gordon wrote a column for *The Australian Christian* which contained the best kept secret among our churches. As a parting gift to help the finances of *The Australian Christian* Gordon published his autobiography and revealed that he was the author of the 'Letters from Tertius'. With Gordon promoting the book we sold over 2,000 copies and it benefitted the capital fund of *The Australian Christian* by over \$5000. As Tertius, Gordon had poked fun at and prodded the readers for years about the foibles of Christians. It was the most popular column in all the years it was written and much speculation was entered into about who was Tertius. Until the publication of *The Life of Tertius* only five people would have known who was the writer of the column that appeared on page 8 with 'Letters to the Editor'.

At the time of Gordon's retirement after nine years as Editor he was presented with a gift which included a typewriter. By that stage the publication of *The Australian Christian* was entirely computerised and Gordon would not have been able to undertake much of the production of an issue if he had to step in at all.

Gordon's legacy at the Christian was of positive encouragement to all. He was gracious in dealing with difficult people and always concerned about the financial health of the journal. During Gordon's editorship *The Australian Christian* sought to share the news of what our churches were doing and achieving with each other and to promote understanding of what it meant to be Churches of Christ in Australia in the different places we were active.

Chris Ambrose is minister of Maylands Church of Christ. His previous ministries were at Linwood Avenue Union Church, Christchurch (NZ) and Goolwa (SA). He is also a former editor of *The Australian Christian*

BORONIA

**Minister (Part-time) 1982-83,
1989 and 1998**

from Keith Milne

Gordon and Lesley were greatly supportive members of the congregation during our 12 years of ministry at Boronia (1986-1998). Gordon wouldn't stand for office but he was no slacker - he often preached and led worship,

and he led a study group for years. For a few years Gordon shared a



part-time ministry with me and, at other times during his membership at Boronia, conducted a number of interim ministries in Victoria and Tasmania.

One of the highlights of our ministry at Boronia was a 'This is Your Life' evening in 1993 for Lesley and Gordon. The place was packed to the rafters. People came from New Zealand and every Australian state. Bill Tabbernee rang from the United States and there was a message from Professor Fred Hollows. It was a great night for two well-deserving people.

Another night our student minister, Mike Folland (1988-89), asked the congregation to divide into small groups and discuss 'great people we had met'. I hoped it might be an ego trip for me, their full-time minister. But not on your nellie - each group said 'GR Stirling'.

For me personally Gordon was a valued listening ear and mentor. To us all he was a true friend and a great example. If we are truly part of all we have met and seen and heard, then our world is a better place because we knew and loved Gordon Stirling.

Keith Milne is a retired minister who served a number of churches

AND FINALLY, a statement on behalf of

COUNCIL OF CHURCHES OF CHRIST IN AUSTRALIA

Within the life and family of Churches of Christ across Australia and abroad, Gordon Stirling has left a lasting legacy. Gordon was unique in his capacity to encourage the best out of team and community for the cause of Christ and His church. The Australian church has witnessed a true servant leader whose passion to empower, build trust and lend support demonstrably inspired others into ministry. Gordon was a true statesman whose long life and ministry has left a train of positive influence to be celebrated and honoured.

Andrew Ball, Chairperson

So many stories to be told ...

GORDON STIRLING'S WRITINGS

Have a look at the Restoration Movement website. It has heaps of Churches of Christ writings to read, including many by 'GR'.

<http://www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/subs/rmau.html#SecS>

Five Fingers: An Examination of Certain Trends in the Restoration Movement in Australia Today. (Provocative Pamphlets No. 1.) 1955.

The Church and Politics. (Provocative Pamphlets No. 15.) 1956.

Baptism Is the Intention of Jesus Christ - Baptism: A Symposium. (Provocative Pamphlets No. 61–62.) 1960.

An On-Going Christian Movement: How the Movement Began; The Message of the Movement; The Movement in Our Day. 1968.

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Victorian Historical Journal Vol. 82, No 1. June 2011

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Contact Graham via phone on 08-9447 7425 or email
grahamfreda@hotmail.com

GORDON STIRLING'S BIOGRAPHY - UPDATED

Look out for an updated edition of *Life of Tertius* to be produced by
Gordon's daughter, Beth Butler.

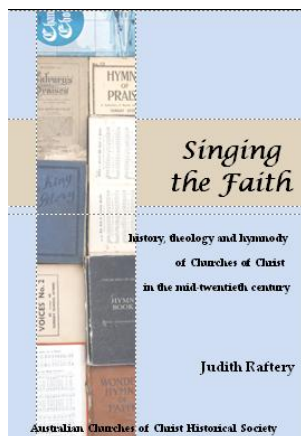
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