

Marion Maddox (ed), *Charles Strong's Australian Church: Christian Social Activism, 1885–1917* (Melbourne: MUP, 2021). 216 pp. RRP \$27.90 Hardcover.

Liberal Christianity may be unwanted detritus on the shoes of the many young Australians who have flocked to Pentecostal churches in recent years. Or so it may seem to some in the Pentecostal movement.

But Christian triumphalism does not always turn out well. In the closing years of the 19th century in Australia it would have seemed that Charles Strong and liberal Christianity was rising, and that it was conservative Christianity that was being consigned to the dustbin of history. Liberal triumphalism of that period now seems to us absurd and embarrassing.

The Australian Church was founded by Charles Strong in Melbourne in 1885, after he broke away from the Presbyterian Church, taking with him a large number of followers who shared his liberal theological commitments. It flourished in Melbourne in the following decades, attracting large numbers of new followers, financing a building in Flinders Street that would have made any Pentecostal pastor proud, and giving rise to many pathbreaking social service organisations and policy reforms. After World War I it declined, for its pacifist stance and other reasons. It was eventually wound up in 1957, giving rise to the Charles Strong Trust which along with the Australian Research Council financed this volume.

As an academic journal Australasian Pentecostal Studies is fortunately not charged with predicting the future, but with deploying available academic expertise from history, theology and other disciplines to draw lessons for the church. As well as resisting triumphalism (a temptation for the Pentecostal movement which has grown rapidly to overtake the Anglicans to become now the second largest Australian religious group after the Catholics) there are many other lessons for the contemporary church.

One lesson is how much Australians want a church that is free from the baggage of the old world denominations. Or as Charles Strong put it, free of denominationalism and the claptrap of empire. Pentecostal churches with their strongly Australian identity (even if key leaders such as Hillsong's Brian Houston and C3's Phil Pringle emigrated from New Zealand) have benefited from this desire.

Australians, especially the aspirational lower middle classes and recent migrants, like an optimistic church. They are much more interested in this than debating the niceties of doctrine. Charles Strong's Australian Church had this optimistic vibe in its early years, riding then on evolutionary theory and Australian nationalism, and the Pentecostal churches certainly have this optimistic vibe today. The book makes much of the Australian Church's lack of a doctrinal statement. It is true that the largest group of Australian Pentecostal churches (those part of the Australian Christian Churches - renamed when Brian Houston was President - formerly the Assemblies of God in Australia) have a doctrinal statement but I suspect my Alphacrucis colleague Mark Hutchinson is right that you would be battling to find an Australian Pentecostal pastor who is aware of its existence let alone has much clue about its content. The Bible is another matter. Incidentally, the account in the book of the Australian

Christian Churches all doctrinal statement is now out of date, with references to young Earth creationism and residues of American Assemblies of God eschatology now deleted.

Another lesson for contemporary churches is how much Australians want to see Christianity put into practice. Pentecostal congregations have been visible contributors to all sorts of social service, often involving church volunteers and usually highly localised. The congregational location of this activity contrasts with the mainstream churches who typically delegate most of the social service work to denominational organisations, which are less visible to the prospective or new church attenders. Service has been much more important to Pentecostal churches than political lobbying to change the structures of society. This is partly because of their decentralised structure and distance from the centres of political influence. Though as Marion Maddox notes in her introduction and postlude the growing numerical and financial power of Pentecostalism, increasing educational attainment, and political representation are changing this. We now of course have a Pentecostal Prime Minister.

Turning to the book, I'm not a specialist in Australian history, let alone Australian religious history, but I found the book stimulating and informative. Marion's introduction sets the scene very well, and giving the reader the essential information about Charles Strong's Australian Church, putting it in Australian historical context, and introducing the key questions pursued by the chapter authors. Her archival work unearthing the songs of the Australian Church will be of particular interest to those working on the songs of the Pentecostal movement - after all it is songs that stick in our mind and shape us - much more than forgettable and mostly forgotten sermons.

It is her postlude, though, which is really excellent and thought-provoking, drawing parallels between Charles Strong's program for his Australian Church, and our current Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's political program. I don't think she gets Scott Morrison and Australian Pentecostalism completely right but there is much to ponder here. In the end though Marion's postlude sees stronger parallels between the Australian Church and the contemporary Uniting Church - not just that the Australian Church after a promising start faced falling attendance and financial problems and was eventually wound up- and the Uniting Church seems headed that way. Marion instead highlights their shared progressive theology, commitment to gender equality, social justice, and inclusive attitude to other churches.

On the subject of other churches, a curious omission in all the talk in the book about of the Australian Church's inclusive stance is discussion of the Catholic Church. It seemed a very Protestant Australian church, sharing the usual Protestant attitudes towards Catholics of those sectarian times, perhaps not surprisingly for one led by a former Presbyterian, and in which Freemasons played a large part.

Another topic I would have liked to have heard more about was the connection with the late 19th-century eugenicist movement. Some of the comments about population and race quoted in the book suggest connections, but these were not examined further by any of the authors.

As well as Marion Maddox' excellent introduction and postlude the other chapters are of high quality. Standouts for me were her chapter on middle-class radicalism and networks of social activism, Wayne Hudson's chapter probing Charles Strong's theological background and questioning the previous simple identification of him with English and Scottish idealist philosophy, and Shurlee Swain's chapter on Charles Strong's involvement with the Royal Commission on Charitable Institutions.

All in all, this is a fine book, and one which despite the lack of obvious relevance to Pentecostals is one that Pentecostal leaders and scholars could learn much from.

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