THE HISTORY OF WESLEY CHURCH, ARMIDALE, 1850 TO 1977

I have been asked to put down on record some of the events and memories of Wesley Church, Armidale, as I remember them. I hope that there are not too many inaccuracies, and if something is wrong or inaccurate, I apologise. I would be pleased to hear if someone can add to this record. I would like to acknowledge that a great deal of the early information comes from the book called 'Recollections', which Deirdre Waters compiled with the help of some of the older members of the congregation in 1973. Many of the contributors have since passed on, so that this information is very important for historical reasons. Deirdre`s book is a very accurate record of some of the early events at Wesley Church, Armidale.

Early in 1859 the first Australian-born minister of the Methodist Church of Australia, Rev. John Watsford, came to Armidale and held family worship in some of the homes. On Sunday, August 28th 1859, Rev W. Hessell held a service in the old Court House. This meant that once the people had come together for public worship they were able to ask the Wesleyan Methodist conference to appoint a minister for Armidale, and Rev W. T. Mayne duly arrived after a journey of seventeen days. His services were held in an empty store on the site of the present Imperial Hotel, and subsequently were held there until the first church was built, which is the building we now know as Wesley Hall. It was the first church in Armidale to be built of brick, and I think that could have been because of the influence of the Palmer family, who were connected with the Methodist Church. William Palmer established the first brickworks in Armidale, which is why the first Armidale bricks have W. P. on them. The church was opened in 1864, and the total cost of the building and furniture was 1239 pounds/11/7. The architect was Mr Thomas Rowe, and the builder was Mr Edward Grover. By this time Rev R. W. Orton was the minister.

The Parsonage was erected in 1868, and we have a photograph of the original building before the second storey was added. It is very similar to a house which is in the grounds of TAS, on the Grafton Road, which was probably built around the same time.

On September 16th 1892, a tender for a new church was accepted, and the foundation stone for the new building was laid by Mr E. Lonsdale, who I think was the local State Member of Parliament at that time, as well as being a Methodist. Remember that all this happened before Federation. Rev W. H. Beale then laid the second stone. The building was opened in 1893 by Rev George Lane, who I would imagine would be the State President of the Wesleyan Methodist Conference.

An interesting sidelight here was the fact that there were four different branches of Methodism in Australia originally, all coming from the United Kingdom at the time of colonisation. As well as Wesleyan Methodists there were United Free Methodists, Primitive Methodists and Bible Christians, and apparently all the other groups were formed because of the authoritative way the original Wesleyan Methodist Conference ran their affairs without regard of the various local situations which existed at that time. The four branches united in 1902, about thirty years before such union came about in the United Kingdom. We in Armidale were always Wesleyan Methodists.

The Methodist cause in Armidale in the early years was very fortunate in that there were a number of well-off business folk in the congregation in the early days, and these folk supported the cause well. As well as Mr Lonsdale, there were families like the Palmers, Curtis, Purkiss, Dewhursts and Lamberts, just to name a few. Not many congregations would have been able to afford to build two brick churches over a thirty-year period.

After the First World War was over, the church had an Honour roll made of soldiers from the congregation who had served in the War and it was dedicated at a special service in 1920. This honour roll is now in the former vestry which we now call the Community room, but for many years it occupied pride of place at the rear of the church. The wall at the rear of the church was a blank wall, only one brick thick, to allow for future extension (remember this was in 1893).

The next big event, as far as I can work out, was the installation of electric lights in the new (present) church, the hall (now Wesley Hall) and the Parsonage in 1922. This project was financed by the Armidale branches of the Methodist Order of Knights and the Methodist Girls Comradeship. The OK`s were led at the time by Bert Mead, who was employed by Armidale City Council to co-ordinate the transfer of the City of Armidale from gaslight to electric light. According to some of the older folks' memories, which are recorded in Deirdre`s book, Bert Mead and his staff made and donated footlights for the Sunday School Hall stage, which was still there when I first came to know Wesley Church, and the money for the lighting was made

through competitive concerts between the MGC`s and OK`s. Apparently there was quite a large following of younger folk in those days, and the OK`s and MGC`s were started in Armidale around 1920.The O.K. Court when I joined was Court of the Vision No 48, and the junior O.K. Court of the Table No 87.

Another activity in those days was choral singing and the Methodist choir was noted for the quality of its performances. The minister at that time, Rev Mills Robson had a fine voice, and no doubt had a great influence on this activity. There is a photo in the church archives of the choir at one time, but,unfortunately, there are no names, so the photo has lost a great deal of significance as a result.

The then kindergarten hall was erected in 1924, under the leadership of Rev W. H. Cheetham, and was built to adjoin the former church building. It used to be a hall with two doors, one at each end of the building, with the former vestry (community room) being used as a connection between the two halls. When we had concerts in later years both the old vestry and the kindergarten hall were used as dressing rooms. When the stage was not being used for performances, there was a platform piece built into the stage which could be taken out when performances were not being held, and there was also a cupboard on the eastern side of the stage which was used for storing books and Sunday School equipment.

The next project was the re-modelling of the Parsonage in 1928 under the guidance of Rev R. J. Williams, who needed more space for his family. Ross Williams, the son of R. J., recalls that the attic ceilings were too low and stuffy, and that led to the alterations. The Williams family moved to a Mrs Turner`s home in Faulkner Street, a few doors south of the Presbyterian Church whilst the renovations took place. Mrs Turner was overseas at the time, and her backyard joined the Methodist property. Why the Church trust decided to go up instead of adding a room or rooms is beyond my reasoning. As you can see from the photos, there is very little resemblance between the previous building and the new one. The lower portion was roughcast to hide the different colours of the bricks, as the original bricks were red and the new ones were grey. Nevertheless, the new building had the reputation of being somewhat palatial when compared with most Methodist Parsonages of the day. One instance of the Armidale Parsonage being of a higher standard than normal came to our notice when a visiting minister came to Armidale and hired a taxi to take him from the railway station to the Methodist Parsonage. The cabby stopped in front of the Parsonage, and the minister, seeing the building, said ‘I asked for the Methodist Parsonage’. The reply came ‘Reverend, this is the Methodist Parsonage’.

One problem which we had in later years through using the previous building was with rising damp, as the 1868 floor level was still maintained. It was only through the voluntary efforts of Don Crawford, who was the Armidale City Council health and building inspector at that time, that the problem has been resolved. It was first brought to our notice when we had a large student gathering in the Parsonage when Dr Jim Udy was the minister, and the floor dropped six inches (150mm) as a result. Don spent many hours on this project, and the church owes him a great deal of thanks for a job well done.

After Rev Williams came Rev Fred Walkden Brown and his wife, the first ministerial couple I can remember, as when Fred retired from the ministry they came back to Armidale to live in their retirement.
Fred was unique as a minister in Armidale, as when he came here he virtually turned the large block of land at the rear of the church, hall and parsonage into a mini-farm. I think he probably had a car at that time, but many of his predecessors would not have had one, as we can see the photo of the stables there, so that there was a large area of land not being used. There was a large vegetable garden, chooks and I think there was a cow as well. One morning he was late for the morning service, which was not all that unusual, and he finally arrived he explained that one of his chooks had caught its head between two palings and was nearly on the point of expiry, so he had to cut its head off with the axe and hang it up before church so that he could go home and pluck it afterwards. On another occasion someone chipped him for being late, and he replied, ‘I might be late sometimes, but I`m not as late as my monthly cheque is at times’. Remember that his ministry was in the time of the Great Depression , and with his wife and four children to feed it might have been just as well that he was very handy in the backyard. Despite his lateness he was greatly respected by the congregation. They were a lovable family. The children were Bruce, Don, Doug and Nancy (former Girls captain of AHS and later Mrs Partridge), and she spent some time as a missionary in Africa. Doug married Barbara Curtis, daughter of Harry Curtis, and after spending some time as principal of Navuso Agricultural College in Fiji, they retired to Forster on the North Coast, and still maintained contact with Armidale from time to time whilst they were still alive. Doug moved to Autumn Lodge in Armidale after Barbara died, to be near his son and to renew acquaintances with people who he had maintained contact with over the years.

During the Walkden Brown ministry Mr Walter Curtis and his sons Bernard and Harry erected the brick fence which still stands at the front of the property. It is an extremely solid fence and certainly has withstood the ravages of time very well, and was a fitting memorial to Mrs Curtis senior, and indeed to the entire Curtis family. Perhaps the family got sick of nailing palings back on as well. Later on a cypress pine hedge was added to catch the dust from the street, which was unsealed at the time. Eventually the hedge had to be dug out, which caused a lot of hard work and backaches.

Rev and Mrs A.Morris Yates were the next folk to carry on the ministry. Rev Yates was connected to the Yates seed company and Bryce Morris Yates, the husband of Mrs Morris Yates, former principal of PLC, was their son. Rev Morris Yates was the minister at Mum and Dad`s wedding, and Dad said he gave him some handy hints on growing plants.

The next big project was the installing of the Willis organ , which was purchased from St. Stephens Presbyterian Church in Macquarie St, Sydney. This happened in the ministry of Rev Ernest Wilson, who I don`t know a great deal about. The organ replaced a hand – pumped one and apparently if the organist for Sunday wanted to practice on Saturday, or if there was a wedding, some of the younger tennis players were seconded to come and pump the organ in their tennis gear. We used to have two tennis courts where the Youth Centre now stands, and the pumpers would come in from tennis and hide behind a screen so that the congregation couldn`t see them in their tennis clothes.

C. P. (Clarrie) Gould was the first organist for the Willis Organ, and he was a music lecturer at Armidale Teachers College. When he moved on in about 1938 Tom Brown, who was a newsagent, became the organist for many years, undergoing training at St James Anglican Church in King St, Sydney, and when one remembers that there were two services requiring an organ in those days, it was quite a commitment.

The Second World War intervened, and there were quite a number of changes in community life, and also in the churches. Before that men used to supervise the running of organizations such as churches, but when they were away at war it fell to the women who were in the organizations to run them as well. It must be said that they did a marvellous job. During that period there was food, clothing and petrol rationing, so travelling was restricted to just the essentials. During that period Rev Knox Read and Rev Morris Young were the ministers.

In the war years, and for sometime afterwards, 2AD would broadcast various church services. Mum used to listen to them when we were still living at ‘Argyle’, and when I first started attending church I can remember the microphones being at the front of the church. John Chapman was usually the technician who came to set things up. I think we had one special broadcast done for a presentation in Sydney. The usual broadcasts were done on a turnabout basis, that is, the Anglicans would be on one week, then the Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, and then they`d go around again. I don`t think the Catholics were on the roster to begin with, but they came in later on. There was always a special effort put on at the church when the broadcasts were on, such as choir items and solos.

I first came to know Wesley Church, and the Sunday school, in 1948, which was when my parents moved from “Argyle” into town when I was nearly 12 years old, to further my education. It was actually in August when we moved, as there were only three terms then and third term commenced in about the second week in September, so I would have started attending Sunday school and church about the same time. Beforehand I had completed 6 years with Blackfriars Correspondence School, which I have been told was in a brick building in Ultimo, in Sydney. I have recently been told that it was near Bunnerong Power Station, which achieved some notoriety in the mid –1950`s for breaking down and causing blackouts. I`ve been told that the school is still there, but it is no longer used as a correspondence school. I think that it was a pity that this happened, because hundreds of bush kids would have lost their only link to primary education.

So then, going to both school and Sunday school was a new experience for me. I know that some of my contemporaries hated going to both, but I never ever felt that way. Whether it was because of my previous background, I couldn`t say, but I enjoyed my time at both school and Sunday school.

When I first started going to Sunday school, W. W. McRae (Bill McRae) was the superintendent, and he used to run the primary/intermediate section in the northern part of Wesley hall (the end closest to Rusden Street if you don`t know your directions.) As we didn`t have the Youth Centre then, there used to be a stage on the end furthest from the street, which I have already spoken about, and Bill McRae used to have a small table near the stage. There were rows of old pews set out in the hall with an aisle up the middle from the entrance door near the street to the table. Remember that Wesley hall was the original church, and I

reckon that the pews would have been the original ones from the church. They weren`t all that stable, unlike the ones we have in church today (except for one notable incident which I will try to remember to include later.) Because the seats in the Sunday school were so unstable, it was quite easy to tip one seat forward at the rear, and it would fall onto the one at the front, and so on until the whole lot went down like a set of dominoes on end. It didn`t matter whether a few Sunday school books happened to be on them at the time either. This didn`t happen all that often, but there was a bit of chaos when it did.

We always started with an assembly, and we all had to have a Sunday school hymnal. Some older ones that were around the place in cupboards had black, red and green soft covers but the one I got had a hard green cover and you could have the choice of green, red or black. There were some quite good hymns in these books, many of them in similar vein to the hymns in the children`s section of our present church hymn books.

We also had an exercise manual, which the Methodist and Presbyterian churches put out jointly. Why both churches didn`t unite completely is beyond me, when the kids in both congregations were being taught exactly the same thing.

There was a piano up near the table at the front, and when we had sung a couple of hymns and had a prayer, there would be an announcement or two to let the scholars know what was happening, followed by the collection. Most of us would be given threepence or sixpence to put in each week, and this used to go towards running the Sunday school.

After the collection had been taken we would break off into our class groups. We used to have some partitions made of plywood and light timber which were hinged on the walls, and they were usually there as permanent fixtures, unless there was a function on which required the whole hall, and then the partitions would be folded back against the wall. There would be a class each for 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th classes, and each class had its own teacher. The girls were taught separately from the boys, and the girls used to sit on the eastern side of the aisle and the boys on the western side of the aisle. It was no different at Armidale High School either, so the Methodists weren`t unique. When we got to High School age we usually found ourselves in some little corner in the church. (Sunday school was held at 9.30 or 9.45am in those days, and church was always at 11.am.)

One year when we had a bit of an influx of scholars the senior boys found themselves in the tennis shed. The tennis courts used to be where the Youth Centre is now, and the tennis shed was fine on a nice day, but it only had a corrugated iron roof which was just about high enough to stand up under, together with corrugated iron sides on all except the northern side, which was open, and a few wooden planks to sit on. It was surrounded by ordinary rabbit netting, which made some of us wonder whether it had doubled up as a chookhouse when Rev. Fred Walkden Brown used to run a mini-farm at the rear of the parsonage. There would have been around 60 boys and girls in the primary section and around 30-40 in the kindergarten section. In later years these figures increased a little, but,sadly, dropped back in the 1970`s and have practically disappeared to no more than ten or twelve at the present time. Unfortunately, sport seems to have taken preference to Sunday School in the modern –day mode of living.

Various people from the church used to act as teachers, and most of the girls who had reached high-school age would go and teach in the kindergarten-2nd class section which was run in what we used to call the back hall, which is where the church offices are now. Some of the little wooden chairs which are still around were used in that section when I first arrived, so they are nearly in the veteran class. They wouldn`t be nearly as old as the black pews which used to be in Wesley Hall, though.

My first Sunday school teacher was Roland Pearson, and I remember Bruce Dewhurst and Wes Taylor also teaching me. I didn`t go on to be a teacher straight away. Believe it or not, I nearly dropped out of Church life, and it was only through Bruce Dewhurst, Wes Taylor and Cec Bramich that I maintained contact with the church. I actually became active again through the influence of Rev. Jim Udy and Denver Crick. They really got me enthused. They`re both deceased now, as are Bruce, Cec, and Rolly, and I owe all these people I have mentioned a great big debt of gratitude.

I digress. When we returned from our classes, we used to have more singing, only this effort was practice for the Sunday school choir. The Sunday school used to present an item each morning at the service. We had some particularly good singers among the girls, but some of the boys weren`t too bad either, and we used to present some pretty good items. We used to file in to the choir seats (where they are now) through the front door. We used to stay in the church until just before the sermon, (half-time) and leave during the

singing of the hymn before the sermon. This meant that we were at church and Sunday school for about two hours straight, but nobody seemed to mind in those days. Mr Bill Bell used to come and conduct us. He was also Bill McRae`s father-in-law, and he was also Rev Denis Towner`s grandfather, and Denis has been particularly active in the updating of the Uniting Church hymnals. Later on, in the early 60`s, under Jim Udy`s influence, I think, the Sunday school choir went all high church and started wearing robes. It was a bit of a departure from the old conservative Methodist scene, but they certainly looked nice. I don`t think some of the parents were too impressed, though, as they had to wash and maintain them. I reckon Jim would have got the idea from something he had seen while he was in America. Jim was never short of ideas, and if one method didn`t work he would come up with another way of doing it.

Sometimes we were twicers, that is, we went to church again at 7.30pm that night and in later years we had MYF (Methodist Youth Fellowship) after that until 9.30pm, when the Smith House girls had to be home. The university wasn`t quite as strict,but 10.30pm was the accepted time to be in colleges, and the town members used to run the students home as there was no bus in those days. The MYF used to have a person elected as transport officer, and his/her job was to see that everybody had a lift home.

One thing which has changed from those days is the mode of dress, and I think that this situation has been the same for all churches. Men always wore suits and ties, no matter what the temperature was, and most of the ladies wore hats to church. I remember being criticized for not wearing a coat on a hot day. Nowadays people only wear a coat to church to keep warm, not as a matter of form.

The Sunday school used to have an annual picnic, usually out at the Pine Forest or Charlston`s Willows. It was always a big event, with a bus being hired, and plenty to eat. It was virtually a church family gathering. Some of the older folk remember an incident when the bus tipped over, and apparently Bruce and Col Dewhurst were in it, according to another account of church reminiscences which exists somewhere. There was another incident at Charlston`s Willows, when I was there, when three little kids got into difficulties in a deep hole, and if it hadn`t been for the prompt action of Lola Waters we could have had a tragedy on our hands. She jumped in fully clothed and pulled them out, and this incident highlights the need for proper supervision at these events.

When we first moved into town, the minister at the time was Rev. Robert A. Bell, who hadn`t been long in Armidale, as Rev Morris I. Young had recently departed to Hornsby. I remember Rev Young and his wife coming out to “Argyle” to visit us a couple of times. He was probably doing well to see us as, although the war would have ended, petrol rationing was still well and truly around. No doubt he would have been given an extra allowance because of his occupation, but there would have been some restriction, nevertheless.

Rev. Bell came up to see us in Douglas St. a number of times, particularly when he realized that I hadn`t (shock horror ) been christened. However Mum always felt that church membership was something that I needed to make up my own mind about, a view with which I agreed entirely, and still do. It wasn`t until 1959 that I was baptized as an adult, and I feel that it meant a great deal more to me than being baptized as an infant.

Rev. Bell was called to Mayfield (Newcastle) in 1952, and Rev Henry Hunter came in April with his wife and daughter Mary, who was in the same year as me at Armidale High School. Mary is now Mary Ball, having married Warwick, who is the son of a former teacher at Dumaresq Public School. Seeing that the Balls had long left Dumaresq before the Hunters arrived, it is certainly a small world. The senior Balls were also regular attenders of Wesley Church and also were in the choir. Mary and Warwick remain firm friends of ours as Mary now plays the organ at Balgowlah Uniting, the church where Beryl`s family worship regularly, as well as being the church in which Beryl and I were married.

The Hunters remained in Armidale until April, 1956, when Henry was called to Roseville and Dr Jim Udy arrived, together with his wife Anne, and children Ben, Anne and Frances. Only three at that stage, as Helen, Stuart and William arrived whilst the Udys were in Armidale. Their arrival meant that there had to be some immediate changes at the parsonage, which had become a bit run down, particularly upstairs. This had occurred since the Walkden Browns and the Morris Yates had lived in the parsonage, as they were possibly the last ones to have family living there, and subsequent ministerial families used to just close off the upstairs rooms, and when you consider that Rev Morris Yates married my mum and dad in 1933, there was a fair gap between then and 1956. I know that the Knox Reads had no children, the Youngs had no children with them, nor did the Bells, and the Hunters only had Mary, who tells me that they certainly didn`t bother with the upstairs section. So there was work to be done, particularly painting and renovating. The painting

wasn`t confined to the upstairs section, and I have memories of the Order of Knights (O. K. s, the boys and young men`s group) being organized to paint the parsonage kitchen some pale green colour with orange trim around the cupboards, etc. The place has probably never been the same since, as yours truly had never picked up a paintbrush before. Definitely not good enough for the Hamel household at that time, but I guess all things are equal in the eyes of God. At any rate it looked considerably better than when we started, thanks mainly to the tuition of Denver Crick, who was a carpenter, and Bruce Dewhurst, who was a good handyman.

Rev Dr. Jim Udy came in 1956 and certainly livened the place up. He was particularly active in getting the University and Teachers College students involved in church activities and some of my contemporaries who I see from time to time recall with great joy the times they had whilst studying in Armidale. He also was instrumental in getting the student groups integrated with the local youth groups and we all definitely learned something in the process.

We had our own town youth group with the OK`s and MGC`s, which mainly met on Friday nights, but there had been also a Sunday afternoon and evening fellowship group, which later came under the constitution of the Methodist Youth Fellowship (MYF). With an annual influx of students, many of whom had never lived away from home before, there was a real need for companionship and fellowship, and with a core of local young folk, the MYF became a very strong organization.

An annual camp was held at “Argyle”, the Hamel property, at the beginning of the academic year, and an adult couple from the church were co-opted to become camp parents, and a camp cook also had to be organised. The camps were mostly held at ‘Argyle’ shearer`s quarters for a number of years, and upwards of a hundred students and young folk used to attend. Jim was the Methodist Chaplain at UNE, and he certainly got the students enthused as well as the town folk.

Occasionally I meet some of the former MYF-ers from time to time who have long since left Armidale, and it is quite obvious that the church activities in general at that time, and the MYF in particular, had a huge impact on a great many lives during their student days here. In recent years I ran across a fellow MYF-er from those days who had recently retired as headmaster of Cootamundra High School. It was only by sheer chance that I found out that he was still living there, as when we visited Sir Donald Bradman`s birthplace a book containing a request for Sir Donald to be a patron of the school was open and signed by Allan Grocott, the headmaster. We promptly rang Allan and he came and picked us up from our motel and we went through a number of photographs of MYF activities which we had both shared in. It was quite obvious that Armidale Methodist Church in general and the Armidale MYF in particular, held a special place in Allan`s life, and we have met many others over the years who have expressed similar feelings for the activities we conducted in those days. There was a great feeling of comradeship among all members, which makes one feel that all the work which was put into the organization of activities was well and truly worthwhile. A few years ago a reunion of former MYFers was held in the Youth Centre. It was very well attended, which endorses what I have said previously, and some folk travelled from places as far away as Perth and Queensland to attend.

One very popular activity consisted of competitive concerts, which were usually skits and takeoffs of various plays and songs for which members of the groups used to write the words. It was well known that Jim Udy was a fast driver, so the MYF girls wrote a song called ‘Flying Doctor Jim Udy’ and sang it to ‘Jubilation T. Cornpone’ from L`il Abner. Another one was a skit on Shakespeare`s ‘Julius Caesar’, and notably Caesar forgot his lines and started to adlib, and got into trouble when he accidentally involved a member of the audience. Another one was a takeoff of ‘Cinderella’, when yours truly was the cuckoo clock, and everyone wondered what I was doing, standing at the back of the stage. At that time we didn`t have the Youth Centre, so all these plays were done in Wesley Hall, and I think that Wesley Hall added to the atmosphere of those performances.

The Methodist (now Uniting Church) Youth Centre became a reality largely through Jim Udy`s enthusiasm, vision and drive during the late 1950`s and early 1960`s. We would never have had this addition to the Church property otherwise. During the mid 1950`s the Methodist Church Trust, who were in charge of the property aspect of the Church, had a meeting, and the then secretary said `I don`t know why we`re meeting. We aren`t able to do anything because we haven`t got any money to carry out anything worthwhile`. At the time that was the truth, and we didn`t have any substantial financial backing. But then one of Jim Udy`s favourite sayings when he wanted anything done involving money was `The Lord will

provide`. The Lord certainly did provide, largely through the vision of Jim Udy, Alwyn Jones, Wal Wicks, Gordon Milne, the Waters family, my dad and several others who were connected with the organizations within the church. The Udy family gave a great deal of their own money towards the initial expense of the commencement of the Youth Centre, the O. K.`s organized tree felling Saturdays on the Waters and Hamel properties, and lunchtime was a picnic cum barbecue outing, with some of the older men and also the womenfolk helping there. There is nothing like a group working together to bond sincere friendships, and this is what happened. Some of the younger townsfolk had never done anything like felling trees before, so the more experienced members of our group always had a learner with them. Remember that at this time chainsaws were comparatively new and uncommon, so that practically all the timber in the Youth Centre was felled with either an axe or a crosscut saw.

We spent several Saturdays in 1959 gathering enough timber for the job, and then we arranged to have the logs carted into Armidale to Kenross Sawmill, which was then in Crescent St. G. T. Cochrane & Co, Bruce Stahlhut and Ridley Bros were the people we engaged. Ken Cameron was a partner in Kenross Sawmill as well as being a member of our congregation, and he loaned the mill to us as his contribution towards the project.

Noel Monckton, Ken`s head sawman, and also a churchman from another congregation gave us his labour and guidance. Ken, Lex, Norman, Roy, John, Neville and David Waters, Peter and Ray Sewell, Brian Rowbottom, Ron Cundy, Denver Crick, Harry Peters and I were the main millhands. There may have been others, and if I have forgotten anyone, my sincere apologies. Ken Waters remembers that the breaking - down saw had an old Ford gearbox, and you nearly needed a dictionary to drive the thing, but apart from one dent in the roof, we survived without incident. No such thing as W.H.& S. then.

When the timber was milled and docked it was stacked, and then the timber went to the adjacent McFayden`s Mouldings, which Bertie McFayden operated and who was also very generous with his charges. The tongue and grooved flooring was then transported to the Church property in readiness for building.

Everybody thought that the construction side of the Youth Centre would be a more or less straightforward operation, but that certainly did not prove to be the case. No fault lay with the building contractor, Ray Lane, but previous tests had shown that there was a ridge of ironstone about a metre below the surface. However, when the footings were being dug, it was discovered that this particular ridge of ironstone was only about 15 cm deep and was not suitable to lay the foundations on. So the contractors dug further and further, and further until a depth of around seven metres was reached. By then everybody decided that this would have to do, because the cost of building was blowing out and if the foundations had gone any deeper there was some danger of striking Armidale`s underground stream, as we were aware that there was a well at the rear of the Parsonage. The foundations were poured and building proceeded without further incident, thank goodness. The main walls were made of pre-stressed concrete, which was a type of construction which was fairly new in Armidale at that time, and therefore a crane had to be used to lower the walls into place.

As I`ve said before, Jim Udy was never one to do a job by halves, and when the time came to officially open the Youth Centre, He invited the Australian President of the Methodist Conference, Rev H. H. Trigge, to perform the opening ceremony. When the time came, on March 4th, 1961, it was discovered that the President`s flight was running about an hour late, which would interfere with the planned programme. So Jim rang the local police and arranged a police escort from the airport to the Youth Centre. Rev Trigge said that the police escort was the highlight of his presidential year. We really did the job in style, and the Youth Centre has been a great asset, not only to the Methodist (now Uniting) Church, but also to the Armidale community, so that now we can host functions like our annual Christmas Lunch for everybody to share in.

After the opening was completed, the churchfolk still had to find ways of paying for the construction cost. The whole Church can thank the womenfolk for their efforts, particularly in catering for functions like Teachers College balls and dances. The women had for many years formed a group called the Methodist Ladies Church Aid, and names I recall are Mesdames Elsie Curtis and Rita Purkiss, who were the chief organizers when I first came to know the Armidale Church. This group formed the basis of a larger group called Wesley Caterers, who became the main fund raisers for the Youth Centre. Ladies I recall being either leaders or helpers were Lorna Cook, Enid Rustin, Joyce Jones, Beryl Wicks, Dot Case, Eva Pearson, Audrey

Peters, Nonie Hamel (my mother), Vera Waters, Muriel Somerville, Pearl Sheppard, Vera Milne, Ev Brown and so many others from the congregation, including men, who were only in Armidale for a few years and then moved on. If I have forgotten any that I should have mentioned from that era, my apologies, but I feel that the people I have mentioned should be recognized as making a huge contribution to this project. It was largely through their efforts that the Methodist Church remained solvent in this period.

Jim Udy must have reckoned that we were going well enough anyway, because when two adjoining properties came up for sale just after we had built the Youth Centre, he urged the Property Trust to buy them. Some of the Trust members were horrified, but (you guessed it) we ended up buying them anyway. The smaller one became a property caretaker`s cottage for a time, and then was converted into a coffee shop cum drop-in centre in Gordon Trickett`s ministry. The larger one became the residence for a second Minister when we had one. In later years we sold both buildings, one being demolished to make way for Kentucky Fried Chicken, and the other was known for years as the Walnut Tree, and is still being used as a food outlet. The sale was made to fund the purchase of another minister`s residence in Yallambee Avenue.

During this period a planned giving scheme was introduced to Wesley Church. It wasn`t the only church, by any means, to have such a scheme introduced to the congregation, as there were other churches in Armidale as well as other parts of the State and nation to have a system introduced. However, the system did arouse a considerable amount of controversy, as there was a cost involved in running such a scheme, and a lot of people felt that the money would be better used in their own congregation.

When Jim Udy left in 1963 to go back to America, his brother Dick Udy followed and consolidated the work that Jim had done. Dick had not been a minister for very long, but he had spent ten years as principal of Lelean Agricultural College in Fiji before entering the ministry. He had been the minister at Grenfell for two years before coming to Armidale, and he, his wife Enid, daughter Eleanor and sons Paul, Chris and Stuart soon became a very active part of the Armidale congregation.

Dick`s teaching background was a great asset in the chaplaincy work at U.N.E., and he was assisted a great deal by John Woodhouse, who was the minister at Uralla and who was also the chaplain at Armidale Teachers College. John`s wife,Grace, was a very good singer, and had a lead part in a production which the Armidale Musical Society produced in the Armidale Town Hall.

The Woodhouse family lived in the Uralla Parsonage, and I think the childrens` names were Anne, Mary, Glenda and John. Uralla was then part of the Armidale Circuit,and in his previous appointment, Rev John had been the Chaplain at Newington GPS in Sydney, and had also assisted in coaching the Rugby teams there. As the MYF had a football team, John became the coach, and the MYF side was fairly successful as a result. John unfortunately died a few years ago, but Grace came back to Armidale recently and renewed acquaintances with a number of people who had been in the church when they were in Armidale.

When the Woodhouses moved on to another call Jim Douglass was appointed to Uralla and also did a lot of Parish work in Armidale. Jim was accompanied by his wife Judy, and as they were at one time in Manly circuit, where Beryl, my wife, grew up, they became firm friends and we still exchange Christmas messages. Jim also played cricket, and as I was also involved with Armidale Churches cricket team, there was also a relationship there. Jim and Judy only stayed in Uralla for two years and then moved on to another occupation which eventually brought them back to Armidale for a number of years. The Douglasses were followed by Fred and Pam Warton. Pam was also an excellent musician, specialising in the guitar.but unfortunately they didn`t stay very long. At about that time Dick Udy received another call to the Overseas Mission Dept. of the Methodist Church, something which he was ideally suited for, but it meant that he and Enid and family would be moving from Armidale. Enid died a few years ago, but some of the Armidale folk keep in contact with Dick, and he, Eleanor abd her husband Brian Mowbray, came back to the MYF reunion which we had a few years ago, and also to the 150th anniversary of the Wesley hall. Chris Udy, Dick's son, is now a Uniting Church minister.

This meant that we had two new ministers in the Armidale Circuit. Rev Gordon Trickett, accompanied by his wife Margaret, sons Stephen, Paul, and Graham and daughter Helen, moved to the Armidale Parsonage, and Rev Ray Weiss, accompanied by his wife Shirley, daughter Pauline (now Pauline Johns) and son Noel, moved into the Uralla Parsonage. Gordon had quite a deal of local knowledge, as he grew up in Uralla and had members of his family still living there. Gordon`s ministry was one which concentrated on people in the community who needed help, and this was understandable as he had

previously been in Goulburn and had considerable experience as a chaplain at Goulburn Gaol. It would have been one of the reasons why he developed the Coffee House as a drop-in centre where people could have somewhere to share their problems and would be able to seek some assistance from others. The Government social assistance system wasn`t as well developed then as it is now, and I think that Gordon could see the beginnings of the problems in society which we have in Armidale today. The smaller cottage in the group was developed as a coffee shop, being opened in September, 1968, by Mrs P. A. Wright, wife of the then Chancellor of UNE. Later it was renovated for this activity, mainly under the guidance and effort of Norm Gray, a member of our congregation then, who was a clerk of works at UNE. He spent many hours on the project, and his wife, Barbara, was given the honour of opening the new section of the coffee house, on 4th March 1972. Gordon and some younger helpers spent many hours at weekends with some of the younger members of the local community, not just Methodists, to try and help them sort out their problems in life.

This form of outreach was certainly challenging at times, and there was one occasion when Gordon turned up at Church one Sunday morning sporting a black eye, which had been the result when one of the drop-ins had a difference of opinion and a scuffle was the result. Some members of the congregation were horrified, and Gordon was criticised for this type of activity, as they thought that it would give the Methodist Church a bad name, but Gordon accepted that, despite the odd difficulty, the form of outreach into the community was justified and essential. I believe he was quite right, particularly when you look at the behaviour of some of the members of the community today.

Another thing I remember was when Gordon tried to introduce the Church in the round to our congregation. The concept had some merit, but when one considers that Wesley Church has a raked floor, it hardly lent itself to that situation. The pews were heavy to shift and I remember one disaster we had when the centre leg of one of the pews was left at an angle. There were a few of us sitting on this pew, not knowing of its unstability, and then Graham Trickett came in late, plonked himself in the middle of the pew, and the whole thing collapsed with an almighty crack. It meant that we all had to move, and the whole episode wasn`t very conducive to a worshipful atmosphere. At any rate, the whole idea of church in the round hasn`t been revived, and whilst I have seen some churches where it would work very well, Armidale Methodist/Uniting isn`t one of them. I guess that this was one instance where you can`t win all the time.

One thing which Gordon did introduce which is still there is the large wooden cross which is suspended from the roof by thin high-tensile wire. When Gordon originally introduced the cross, it consisted of 2 weather-beaten pieces of 4”x 2” timber, which was probably closer to the type of wood which was used for the crucifixion, but since its introduction the cross has had some wood stain applied to fit in which the church`s décor.

We were fortunate in those years in that we had a number of good cricketers in the congregation who used to bolster the Armidale Churches Cricket team. The Churches team originally started in 1947, with Alwyn Jones from the Methodists and Alan Peden from the Presbyterian congregation forming a Churches P&M club. They had one B-grade side in those days and the matches were only one-day fixtures, being held on Saturday afternoon. I joined the club at the end of 1953, when I left school, through the influence of Ray Clark and Warren Wilkinson, who was a foundation member. At the beginning of 1954 –55 cricket season, the annual general meeting of the club was held at 110 Dumaresq St, Len Diamond`s residence, and as soon as I walked in I was elected secretary, a job which I did for 13 years. Subsequently I was elected president for another eight years. During that time I attended many meetings of the New England District Cricket Association, and one president I well remember was Ray Farrell Senior, who had been teaching at Armidale High when I was there. I mention cricket at this point because both Stephen and Graham Trickett were both good keen cricketers, as was Norman Gray. By this time there were two teams in the local Comp, and sometimes we had three, depending on numbers. There were a number of locals I could mention who played cricket with Churches, and seeing that this year they have decided to call themselves Armidale City, for reasons which I can quite understand, the history of Armidale Churches Cricket team could quite easily be the subject of another talk sometime in the future.

Another digression. Ray Weiss eventually moved on to another call at the end of 1972, and Rev Vernon Prowse came, not to Uralla, but to Armidale, and lived in the residence at 132 Marsh St. Vernon was accompanied by his wife, Cathy, a former ATC student, and four young children, Martin, Cameron, Belinda and Jason, the latter two being twins. The family fitted in well with the Armidale congregation, and

Vernon`s down-to-earth approach and previous experience as an accountant before he entered the ministry was welcomed by us all, and a bonus was that he was also a cricketer.

Many of us could see how times and outlooks were changing and evolving, and this trend certainly continued with the appointment of Rev Ian Fardon in 1975. Ian was accompanied by his wife, Gwen, and daughters Alison and Margaret. Ian had been in Rabaul as a missionary for a number of years and had been brought up on a dairy farm in Northern Queensland, but he also had a great deal of contact with the academic folk at UNE, something which started with Rev Henry Hunter and continued with all the ministers who were appointed to Armidale subsequently.

Ian continued the type of outreach which Gordon Trickett had started, but he also developed a shelter in the disused stable at the rear of the Parsonage for men who were down on their luck. The shelter was very basic, but at least it was better than sleeping under a bridge, as some of the folk had been doing who came to seek assistance at the church. Indeed, we found out that there was list of places to go on one of the concrete piers of Stephens Bridge. I don`t know whether that list is still maintained or not. The stable has since been demolished.

I mentioned OH&S before, but one thing which was a real worry to most of us was Ian`s habit of getting up on the church roof. At the time he was here some of the slates on the roof used to move in the wind, but instead of getting someone with a cherrypicker or scaffolding in, Ian used to have a ladder with some rope, and had a system all of his own of moving over the roof to fix the problem slates. We reckoned that he wanted to get closer to Heaven, and that he would finish up there quicker than he needed to, but he never ever had a mishap. Perhaps the Lord was keeping a good eye on him. Anyhow the Church property committee eventually had a contractor from Grafton (Frank White, a former Armidale Rugby League player who died in September 2015) come in and repair the whole roof. You wouldn`t believe this, but only a few years after the repair had been done, Armidale had the 27th September 1996 hailstorm, and the church insurance company had to replace the entire roof.

Most ministers have training to cope with grief situations, as I am sure you would be aware these situations are part of a minister`s witness. We have been fortunate in that all of our ministers have been good in this situation, but Ian was the type of person who could relate to almost every situation. He had a number of personal tragedies in his own life, and although it is a hard way of gaining experience, he was able to draw on these experiences to help others in need.

Ian`s appointment was the last made under the Methodist Church, as our church became a Uniting Church in June 1977. It was a disappointment to us that the entire Presbyterian Church didn`t join with us as we felt that we could have been a greater witness to the community had this happened. However it wasn`t to be, and sadly, there was a court case between the former Methodist and Presbyterian churches over the whole issue of property, and, naturally, the only winners in this case were the lawyers concerned.

I will stop at this point because the Uniting Church is another subject. I would like to thank everyone for their attention and if I have got something wrong I hope you will point it out to me or our group. Thanks once again.

John Hamel