FOUNDATIONS
Assemblies of God in Australia
1937 Conference
Denis V Smith
THE STORY OF THE 1937 CONFERENCE

of the

PENTECOSTAL CHURCH IN
AUSTRALIA

and the

ASSEMBLIES OF GOD (QUEENSLAND)

DENIS V SMITH
INTRODUCTION

The Assemblies of God in the USA was founded in 1914 as many ministers and laymen alike began to realise just how far-reaching the spread of the revival of Pentecostalism had become.

Concerned leaders felt the desire to protect and preserve the results of the revival by uniting through cooperative fellowship. In April of that year, about 300 preachers and laymen were invited from 20 States and several foreign countries for a general council in Hot Springs, Arkansas, United States to discuss and take action on these and other pressing needs. E. N. Bell was elected as Chairman (title later changed to General Superintendent) and J. Roswell Flower was appointed as the General Secretary.

The British Assemblies of God came into being in the United Kingdom in 1924. Nelson Parr, the pastor of a congregation in Manchester, called a meeting of 14 people in Aston, Birmingham in which they decided to form the Assemblies of God in the United Kingdom. Others had been invited, but train strikes meant that many people could not get there. During the meeting, they agreed on their Fundamental Truths; to work together to protect sound doctrine and to work together to achieve what they could not do on their own. A second meeting was held in May that year in Highbury, London, with 80 people present. It was at this meeting at the Assemblies of God in Great Britain and Ireland was established. Thirty-Seven English assemblies and one from Belfast joined, and thirty-eight Welsh assemblies joined them in August.

Their documentation would assist in the forming of the Assemblies of God in Australia.
In 1937, following an Easter Convention, the ‘Pentecostal Church of Australia’ and the ‘Assemblies of God in Queensland’ met in the Pentecostal Church, Lawson Square, Sydney, New South Wales.

Philip Duncan commented, “On Good Friday, the services augured well for further blessing; they paved the way for everyone to become acquainted, so that before long, stiffness gave way to friendliness, and in the liberty, that prevailed, the happy family feeling predominated. How good it was for ministering brethren to fraternise and exchange thoughts and experience, gaining by such, a lively sympathy and consideration for each other. The messages from the ministering brethren were most acceptable and profitable by His presence.”

Saturdays March 27th 1937.


The Conference unanimously elected C L Greenwood Chairman of the Conference and H E Wiggins the Conference Secretary.
C L Greenwood stated that the object of this conference between the Pentecostal Church of Australia and the Assemblies of God (Queensland) was to provide a basis for the uniting of such works in closer ties. He trusted that all the delegates would be impartial in their outlook on the questions arising and that the Holy Spirit would lead them in their decisions.

It was agreed that all voting was by secret ballot and that Queensland representatives be given votes by proxy up to the number of votes of the Pentecostal Church of Australia delegates.

“Despite the many difficulties that seemed insurmountable, the hand of God was upon us to guide and direct, giving unlimited grace. It was His evident purpose to take us on further in the Holy Ghost conquest of the Southern Continent.” [Philip Duncan]

“The arduous business sessions taxed the delegates to the utmost, and the display of grace and consideration alone allowed the final and blessed results to be accomplished. Much discussion ensued on constitutional matters as reference was made to the organisation of the Assemblies of God in the United States and Great Britain as well as documentation from the Pentecostal Church in Australia and the Assemblies of God in Queensland.” [Philip Duncan]

At times, it seemed impossible that a suitable constitution could be formed to meet the varied conditions of the large Commonwealth, with such vast differences separating scattered assemblies, but knowing the mind of the Spirit, they faced the formidable undertaking with prayer, perseverance and every other means in their power, and at last the hopes of all were realised.

Finally, a large majority of voters agreed that the name of the United Constitution be “The Assemblies of God in Australia” and “defined” as submitted in the Queensland draft. The “Objects” and “Prerogatives” were unanimously endorsed as also set forth in the Queensland draft.

The “Doctrinal Basis” of the new Fellowship took longer to decide.
After much discussion, it was unanimously agreed that the Chairman and Secretaries of the Pentecostal Church in Australia and the Assemblies of God (Queensland) form a committee to go into the “articles of faith” and submit a recommendation to the Conference.

After considerable discussion, “Constituents” was left in abeyance until the report was received. “Autonomy of States” was being discussed when the Chairman brought this session to a close with prayer.

**SUNDAY MARCH 28TH 1937**

The Conference resumed at 2 pm with prayer. Further lengthy discussion relating to the Autonomy of the States and embracing the Scriptural understanding of the Ministry in special regard to the office of Eldership and the Ministry Gifts of Ephesians 4.11 took place. It was suggested that the delegates pray much over this matter.

**MONDAY MARCH 29TH 1937**

At 9 am the session opened with prayer and the question of Eldership and other ministries was again fully discussed.

Philip Duncan commented, “Down to the real business of the Conference. Discussions, proposals, objections, rulings, but always resource ‘to the law and the testimony.’ Modern days may require modern methods, but the principles of “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints” must remain unaltered. Prayer made in difficult matters. Personal opinions merged in the mind of the Spirit. Agreements reached in major matters.” [Australian Evangel and Glad Tidings Messenger, August 1937, p4]

**TUESDAY MARCH 30TH 1937**

This was to be a full discussion as the focus was on the autonomy of States.

The Conference unanimously agreed that clauses in the Queensland draft and the nature of co-operative fellowship based upon the American Constitution were framed and inserted into the Constitution.

They constitutionally defined Local Assemblies and Officers of local Assemblies.

A lengthy discussion regarding church properties, and local Trustees ensued and it was carried unanimously that this matter was a State one and would come under the By-laws to be considered later.

The Conference decided that Commonwealth Executive Officers be appointed and consist of Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer, and Auditors with duties and powers as set forth in the Queensland draft.
Commonwealth General Conference was set as their “highest authority of governance” and assemblies with “up to 50 members shall be represented by their Pastor and Assemblies with more than 50 members shall be entitled to one additional representative at any General Conference.”

Considerable discussion followed as to the form of election of such Presbytery –

that the Presbytery consist of the Chairman of each State together with the Commonwealth Chairman and Secretary and such others as the General Conference shall appoint

OR

that the General Conference appoint all members of the Executive from among the fully ordained ministers of the Fellowship.

After lunch, further discussion took place on the Commonwealth Executive Presbytery election and the second proposal was adopted.

Relying again on the Queensland draft, clauses relating to the Executive Presbytery were adopted. These were concerns, that the administration of Commonwealth business should be vested in the Executive Presbytery and its decision should be final unless reversed by the Commonwealth General Conference.

The Commonwealth General Presbytery would consist of all Pastors carrying full ordination certificates and a Credentials Committee would be formed.
The Conference paused as the Chairman read the following telegram to the Conference

**TELEGRAM**


Soon unanimous agreement was reached concerning the recognition of the **ministry of women**.

A Committee of the Chairman of the Pentecostal Church of Australia and the Assemblies of God (Queensland) and their secretaries was appointed to consider the **Missionary question** and also **Bible School** and **Official Organ** and report back to Conference.

Again, the recommendations of the Queensland draft were adopted concerning “**Ministerial Endorsement**” and “**Alteration of the Constitution**.”

The matter of “**Constituents**,” which had been left in abeyance was now proceeded with.

And again, the Queensland draft was endorsed with the addition of a clause “e” “A certificate shall be issued by the Commonwealth Executive Presbytery to all Assemblies in the fellowship and also such Assemblies as shall be free from time to time be received into the fellowship. (Commonwealth).”

The report of the Committee concerning “**Doctrinal Basis**” was unanimously endorsed and after discussion, unanimous agreement was reached concerning the **qualifications of the Ministry** as set forth in the American Constitution 1 Article 5, with minor alterations.

The two groups for the most part, were in harmony in their doctrine, culture and with a good focus on world mission and evangelism, so there was a basis upon which they might merge.
WEDNESDAY MARCH 31ST 1937

The session opened with prayer and H. E Wiggins read the report and recommendations of the Committee which made reference to the British Constitution (Minute 29).

Unanimous agreement was recorded concerning the necessity of a Bible School.

It was recorded in the Minutes, “The Commonwealth General Presbytery recognise the need of practical training of prospective Ministers and missionaries. It is in hearty sympathy with every effort to provide such training along satisfactory lines.”

A Committee of four was to be appointed by the Commonwealth Executive Presbytery to govern the policy of the School subjects under the supervision of the Executive Presbytery.

The Committee’s recommendation that “The Official Organ be called ‘The Australian Evangel and Glad Tidings Messenger’ and be under the supervision of the Executive Presbytery of the Commonwealth. Minutes 37, 38 and 39 of the British Constitution are suggested as a pattern.” was adopted.
Concerning “Warfare,” the attitude of the Commonwealth fellowship as set forth in the Pentecostal Church of Australia draft was adopted.

Recommendations made in the Queensland draft concerning State Conferences and State Presbytery were endorsed.

After lunch, discussion ensued as to whether By-laws should be made binding upon all States and Assemblies or only recommended as being in conformity with the Constitution.

Reference was made to the Pentecostal Church of Australia By-laws which should be taken clause by clause and considered before a decision be reached as to their binding nature or otherwise.

Finally, the agreed Constitution of the new Fellowship was endorsed unanimously and the debate returned to the By-laws.

After considering a few of the many suggested By-laws, the Chairman announced his inability to preside at a prolonged Conference and suggested to the Conference that they might prefer to pass on to some of the other important matters.

To expedite the business, a large majority agreed that “The By-laws be recommended to each State and each local Assembly as in conformity with the Commonwealth Constitution.”

Further discussion then ensued and the advisability of appointing a Committee to frame suitable By-laws was considered. Opinions concerning the effect of By-laws upon individual States were shared on the floor of the Conference and it was proposed by Bro. Duncan and seconded by Bro. Armstrong that the last motion be rescinded.

It was proposed by Bro. Duncan and seconded by Bro. Purvis” That a Committee be formed of the Chairmen and Secretaries of the Pentecostal Church in Australia and the Assemblies of God (Queensland) frame the By-laws which should be submitted by post to the members of the Conference and whose votes as to their binding nature or not should be final. This proposal was carried unanimously.

Discussion as to the power of the delegates to the Conference to appoint took place.

At this juncture, Bro. Roberts, standing for his principles, found it necessary to leave the Conference as a protest against the election of such officers. Bro. Roberts held the view that the Conference had no power to appoint the officers of the Executive Presbytery until the Constitution and By-laws had been accepted by the various Assemblies, otherwise the Conference would be functioning without the Assemblies’ consent. He asked that his protest be registered in the Minutes and he then left the meeting.
Immediately P. B Duncan moved and A. T. Davidson seconded that “the election of the Executive Presbytery, Chairman, Vice-Chairman, and General Secretary be proceeded with.” This was carried unanimously.

The following were nominated for election — C.L. Greenwood, C.G. Enticknap P. Duncan. H.E. Wiggins, W.A. Buchanan, C. Reid, A. Davidson, J.M. Roberts, and M. Armstrong. After a ballot, had been taken, C.L. Greenwood, C.G. Enticknap P. Duncan. H.E. Wiggins, W.A. Buchanan, C. Reid and A. Davidson were duly elected.

C. L. Greenwood was elected as Commonwealth Chairman, Bro. C. G. Enticknap was elected as Commonwealth Vice-Chairman and H. E. Wiggins was elected as Commonwealth Secretary/Treasurer.

The Commonwealth Executive Presbytery was empowered to appoint the Editor of the Official Organ to operate until the next Conference and to appoint the Missionary Council to operate until the next Conference.

It was understood that these appointments would only operate upon the ratification by the Assemblies of the United Constitution.

An organisation needs finance to operate.

Conference was unanimous in its decision that each Assembly throughout the Commonwealth take up an offering on the first Sunday in May of each year for the purpose of defraying the expenses of the Commonwealth Officers, and that this year it be taken up within a fortnight of the acceptance of the Commonwealth Constitution.

Votes of thanks were recorded to C. L. Greenwood for his able performance as Chairman of the Conference. To H. E. Wiggins for his patient fulfillment of the office of Sectary to the Conference and to C. G. Enticknap for his assistance to the Chairman and the Conference in many matters.

“Never did a more strenuous session come to a close, and the brethren wearied with their concentration and strain, were ready to return to their churches, feeling satisfied that they had something definite and scriptural to lay before their people.” [Philip Duncan]

The Conference came to a triumphant close. ‘It is the Lord’s doing, it is marvellous in our eyes.’
The Assemblies of God in Australia is no mere organisation, but a blessed organism, impregnated with Divine life and power. Hallelujah!’ [Australian Evangel and Glad Tidings Messenger, August 1937, p4]

Their decision to establish the new Fellowship was carried ‘by a large majority.’

How large that majority was, is not recorded. [Minutes of the United Conference of the Pentecostal Church of Australia and the Assemblies of God (Queensland) 27.3.1937]

In Sydney, this small band of leaders formulated their United Constitution, which was the basis of a co-operative fellowship of autonomous churches, joining together to fulfil the Great Commission of Jesus Christ in Australia and overseas.

They laid the foundations for a Fellowship still exists today as Australian Christian Churches.

Their commitment was to God-ordained leadership, autonomy of churches, a world mission’s vision, a Bible school and an official magazine called, ‘The Australian Evangel and Glad Tidings Messenger.’

Philip Duncan reported his impressions of that historic meeting.

“Soldiers stage reviews, athletes arrange Olympiads, but Pentecostals gather at conventions. Easter 1937 will always rank as the most important in Pentecostal history to that date, as it marked the union of the Assemblies of God, Queensland and the Pentecostal Church of Australia, the new organisation becoming the Assemblies of God in Australia. All seemed to realise the momentous matters at issue, but were just as determined to fully enjoy the fellowship of the gathering, trusting God to bring about a unity that would make the full gospel testimony more effective, more glorious, and more desirable. “

After the Conference, the Secretary duly sent out a copy of the By-laws, as recommended by the Committee appointed at the Sydney Conference, to each of the delegates for their perusal on the 14th June, 1937. The result of the vote by post as to the bidding nature of the By-laws or otherwise was as follows: -

For the By-laws being recommended only – 14 votes
For the By-laws being binding upon all States and Assemblies – 6 votes
Informal Votes – 3 votes

The By-laws are then recommended only to the States and Assemblies as a suitable pattern in conformity with the United Constitution.
Assemblies of God Commonwealth Conference 1939

Denis V Smith leading a Communion Service at Richmond Temple 1968
The story is based on

MINUTES OF THE UNITED CONFERENCE OF THE PENTECOSTAL 
CHURCH OF AUSTRALIA AND THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD (QUEENSLAND)

Held in the Pentecostal Church. Lawson Square, Sydney. commencing, 9 o’clock on March 27th 1937.


If you would like a copy of the historical record, contact the author at his website

http://denisvsmith.com/contact/
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PASTOR T. HALLOP.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sydney 1937 (Cover)
Richmond Temple Souvenir Easter 1939
Minutes of the United Conference of the Pentecostal Church of Australia and the Assemblies of God (Queensland) held in the Pentecostal Church. Lawson Square, Sydney. commencing, 9 o’clock on March 27th 1937.
Australian Evangel & Glad Tidings Messenger
Conversations with some of the founding pastors
To the many people who have sent me photos and other memorabilia.