

Blackwood Catholic Church History

The development of the Catholic community of Blackwood and Belair reflects both that of the Catholic Church in South Australia and the general development of the district.

The early Catholics of Blackwood and Belair originally formed a small proportion of the district's general population. The community comprised a few families who generally lived and worked within the district, many in the farms and orchards of Coromandel Valley.

Until the twentieth century, Blackwood and Belair was considered a country district with Mass being celebrated only occasionally by visiting priests. Masses were generally held in private homes, the most regularly used being that of John McNamara in Coromandel Valley. Special occasions might be celebrated in community venues such as the Coromandel Valley institute, and later the Boys' Club Hall on Coromandel Parade.

Religious worship became more regular after the Passionist Fathers became responsible for serving the Catholics of Blackwood and Belair late in 1896, after the latter opened their retreat house at Glen Osmond.



Ever eager to have a church in which to worship, the local Catholics set about fundraising for the purpose and, in 1911, succeeded in raising £50 which was sufficient to acquire the block of land on the corner of Coromandel Parade and Simla Parade. Later, in 1919 they had the opportunity to have their own church when the government sought tenders for the one-time Catholic Soldiers' Hut at the Mitcham Army camp. The local bid was successful and the hut was dismantled, transported to Blackwood and re-erected on the site previously acquired. The new church opened on 4 May 1919 and provided the occasion for Archbishop Robert Spence to make his first visit to the district.

The district became part of the parish of Kingswood in 1923 with Father Cornelius Bernard Crowley as parish priest. Mass was celebrated once a month.

Having acquired a church, the local community yearned for something more fitting and set about fundraising to this end. The foundation stone for a new church was laid on 16 February 1936 by Archbishop Killian: the galvanised iron church was moved to the rear of the block to serve as a hall. The first Mass in the new church, designed by architects Woods Bagot, was celebrated on 12 July 1936 on the morning prior to the formal blessing and opening by Archbishop Killian. The church was



dedicated to St Paul of the Cross in recognition of the Passionist Fathers' early identification with the district.

The Blackwood and Belair district began to lose its rural character after World War II when the South Australian population boomed with assisted migration and new families moved into the hills district. Many of the new people considered Blackwood and Belair as dormitory suburbs because of the ready railway access to Adelaide. Consequently, the composition of the local Catholic community changed along with that of the local community generally.

The continued development of the district prompted the call for a second Mass centre at Belair and, in February 1950, Mass was celebrated in the St John's parish hall. The following year the galvanised iron hut at Blackwood was removed to a site on Sheoak Road at Belair where it once again served as a church.

Ongoing growth of the local Catholic community led to the creation of a separate parish of Blackwood and Belair in December 1954 with Father Edward Griffiths (1954–56) as first parish priest, the first presbytery being a home acquired on Station Road at Blackwood.

Responsibility for the two Mass centres became an onerous one for Father John McManus (1956–70) who succeeded Father Griffiths and led to the Belair church and congregation generally being serviced on Sundays by priests on special duties in the Archdiocese such as Fathers James Gleeson and Edward Mulvihill who served as directors of Catholic education, and later by John Swann director of the Family Welfare Bureau.



Catholic life remained very traditional until the 1960s. The Mass was celebrated in Latin with the priest facing the altar and his back to the congregation. Catholics considered themselves distinct from others of other denominations and were sustained by membership of various sodalities such as the Legion of Mary which was formed locally in 1953, the Catholic Women's League and the Holy Name Society.

Children were generally sent out of the district to Catholic schools.

Catholic life changed after the Second Vatican Council which opened in October 1962. Key parts of the Mass were celebrated in English from 5 July 1964; from December 1964 Catholics had to fast for only an hour before Communion; Friday abstinence from meat became history after 5 May 1967.

The Vatican Council also led to a greater role for laity in the daily life of the local Catholic community. The parish council, which became the vehicle for this greater participation, met for the first time on 15 November 1970 under inaugural chairman Frank Rogers. Soon afterwards the council established

various subcommittees that have continued to oversee different aspects of parish life.

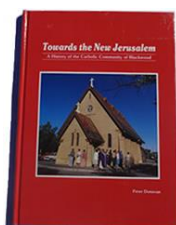
Members of the local community had great involvement in the building of a new church at Belair. A new site was acquired on Laffers Road at Belair and plans were drawn for a new war memorial church. Archbishop James Gleeson blessed the foundation stone of the new church devoted to Our Lady of the Way on 16 December 1973 and returned six months later, on 22 June 1974, to bless and consecrate the church.

The local community gained another valuable asset when 'the Cottage' was acquired immediately adjacent to Our Lady of the Way for parish community use.

The Blackwood parish was firmly established by the end of the twentieth century. The attention of the parish council and the community turned from the provision of physical assets to the implementation of initiatives to ensure the continued relevance of the Gospel as society generally became increasingly secular.

Symptomatic of the challenges confronting the modern Church — particularly the reduction in priestly vocations — was the appointment of Father Michael Musyoka as parish priest in June 2011. Father Michael was recruited from Kenya, where he was ordained in 1997, and came to the position after completing a masters degree in public health and international development at Flinders University and working with African Catholic communities in Adelaide. Early priests to serve the Blackwood district had originated from Ireland: Monsignor Henry Skehan (1971–89) was the last of these. There followed the Australian priests Peter Ward (1986–98) and James Honnor (1998–2011): Father 'Jim' retired after leaving Blackwood.

The Catholic community of Blackwood and Belair has continued to reflect the general history of the Church in South Australia. There have been challenges during this history, but these having been met, the community remains well placed to meet those of the future.



This account is an abbreviated version of the book, **Towards the New Jerusalem, a History of the Catholic Community of Blackwood**, by Peter Donovan 1986. A limited number of the books are available from the Parish Office on request.