



A Brief History from Foundation in 1822

Introduction

The Sydney Bethel Union Society (as it was known initially) was formed in Sydney in 1822 on the initiative of the Rev William Cowper an Anglican clergyman to provide 'religious and secular instruction and social recreation to seamen of all nations visiting the port of Sydney.'

A Brief History

The main seaports of England in the early 1800s were well served by numerous religious bodies pledged to devote themselves to the spiritual welfare of seamen who were crewmembers aboard visiting naval and merchant vessels. These organisations were the forerunners of the 'seamen's missions' now found in ports all over the world which provide leisure and entertainment facilities. Ships' crews are able to spend off duty hours ashore relaxing in a friendly and welcoming 'club-like' environment together with an opportunity to participate in worship in chapels incorporated into the Mission and to receive counselling.

One of these organisations was known as the 'Bethel Movement' whose work initially centred around chaplains conducting services on board ships lying in the port of London and distributing religious texts to crews. Later similar activities were developed in other ports such as Liverpool and Bristol. ('Bethel' is a Hebrew word meaning 'House of God'.)

The Development of the Bethel Flag originated in the port of London in 1817 and arose out of the need to identify the vessel in which the church service would be held on a particular Sunday. The flag has the star of hope in one corner and a dove

with an olive branch in the other. It was first flown in Sydney from the masthead of the Brig LYNX on 17th November, 1822.

With the growth of these activities came the realisation that a formal structure was needed to co-ordinate and expand the work and in 1819, what was eventually to become known as the Bethel Union was founded. The realisation that a shore-based mission should be established to enhance the enterprise quickly followed.

Thus the Sydney Bethel Union Society was formed in Sydney in 1822. A decade later the Committee, accepting that provision of shore-based facilities would lead to more effective ministry, was successful in obtaining from the colonial government a waterfront site for Mariners. However, the site - at the Southern end of what is now Darling Harbour - proved unsatisfactory and enactment of the Sydney Bethel Union Trustees' Act, 1851 (NSW) authorised the Trustees of the Bethel Union to dispose of the property and seek a more appropriate location

It says much for the zeal and commitment of the founders that the Sydney Bethel Union was formed barely three years after the establishment of the English parent body, remembering at that stage that communication links between England and Australia were tenuous. For example, news of Admiral Lord Nelson's triumph in the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 took five months to reach Sydney and, until the early 1850s when regular mail services by steam ship commenced, a correspondent sending a letter to England could wait as long as six months for a reply.

Five years later a grant of land on the Western side of Circular Quay (known as 'The Rocks') was formalised and a new and larger Mariners Church was consecrated in 1859. By 1863 when nearly 20,000 seamen visited Sydney, attendances at services at Mariners Church were growing, a program of social activities was offered and the first Annual Seafarers' Service (still held today) was arranged.

Extensions and refurbishment of the property in the early 1870s funded by the Sydney Bethel Union saw the addition of a hall and other facilities. Within 10 years, total crews of ships calling

at Sydney was approximately 50,000 men and by 1895, the Sydney Bethel Union ranked second in the sailors' institutes of the world.

In 1895, the Church of England Mission to Seamen became a Branch of the Missions to Seamen, England (formed in England in 1856) and after negotiations the Trustees of the Sydney Bethel Union granted the Missions to Seamen a three-year renewable lease of the Mariners' Church for a nominal rental of £1 per annum.

The property was renamed as the Missions to Seamen, Sydney and commenced the existing strong link between the two organisations that survives to this day and under which the Sydney Bethel Union has made substantial annual grants to the Mission to enable it to achieve its objects.

In 1910 further initiatives by the Sydney Bethel Union saw commencement of significant extensions to the building. These involved the addition of an extra storey, conversion of the original chapel into a recreation hall, a new chapel (accommodating about 200) and a vestry, along with administrative offices, a library and an Officers' Room with some accommodation cubicles. On the ground floor, a gymnasium, smoking room and other facilities were added.

In the early 1970s the NSW Government resolved to encourage redevelopment of The Rocks area on the Western side of Circular Quay in which the Mission to Seamen was located. Two years later the Sydney Cove Redevelopment Authority had made a formal offer of \$1.9 million for the property which the trustees of the Sydney Bethel Union accepted. This prompted a search for alternative premises close to the waterfront so that effective ministry of the Mission could be maintained.

In 1975, the Sydney Bethel Union purchased for the use of the Missions to Seamen a building at 11-15 Macquarie Place, Sydney (immediately to the South of the Circular Quay ferry wharves). The building was adapted for its new role and leased to the Missions to Seamen for 25 years. The official opening ceremony was held in April 1977.

At this time rapid changes were occurring in international shipping and these had an impact on the operations of the Mission. These included reduced crew sizes and shorter stays in ports. Port developments included the construction of container shipping facilities in the port of Botany Bay hence a forecast decline in the number of ships coming to the port of Sydney. The Trustees of the Sydney Bethel Union in 1984, also acknowledging the new location of the Missions to Seamen had required unexpectedly heavy ongoing financial support, commissioned a report on the likely future needs of the Missions to Seamen Sydney for the ensuing 15 years. This report essentially recommended that the Mission should be relocated to an area closer to where visiting vessels berthed and also shipping activity in Botany Bay should be kept in mind when the Missions' future operational plans were under consideration. Meanwhile attractive offers for the purchase of the Macquarie Place property were being received and it was eventually sold by auction in 1985.

As an interim measure to enable the Sydney Mission to continue operations, the Trustees of the Sydney Bethel Union agreed to fund its temporary occupation of space in the Carla Zampatti Building at 439-441 Kent Street, Sydney and the necessary alterations to the Building required to render it suitable for operations.

The search for a suitable site resumed and in late 1990 the Trustees of the Sydney Bethel Union submitted a successful tender to the NSW Government to acquire a property at 320-324 Sussex Street, Sydney for \$2.35 million. After completion of necessary alterations to render it suitable for the Mission's operations, the building was officially named *Flying Angel House* by the Governor of NSW, Rear Admiral Peter Sinclair AC RAN (Rtd) at a dedication ceremony on 20 June 1993.

The name of the Missions to Seamen worldwide was changed in 2002 to 'Mission to Seafarers'.

For some years the Trustees of the Sydney Bethel Union had been receiving representations from the Missions to Seafarers in other ports in NSW for financial assistance. The original Act of

Parliament restricted the activities of The Sydney Bethel Union to the Port of Sydney. Accordingly, it sought the assistance of the NSW Government for its charter to be amended by legislation to enable it to extend its support for seafarers' charitable interests to all ports in NSW. In 2002, *The Sydney Bethel Union Extension Amendment Act 2002* was enacted.

Quarterly grants were then provided to the Mission to Seafarers at Newcastle, Port Kembla, and Eden in addition to those traditionally provided to Sydney. These grants enable these Missions to provide quality pastoral care and facilities to visiting seafarers to these ports.

The cost of maintaining the Sussex Street building, and difficulty leasing surplus space, lead to a decision to sell that building and relocate Mission to Seafarers Sydney to smaller premises within a historic Bond Store at 24 Hickson Road, Walsh Bay in 2012.

The Mission to Seafarers Sydney's new premises at 24 Hickson Road was officially opened on 25th July 2013 by the then Governor of New South Wales".

In 2018, an amendment to the Sydney Bethel Union Extension Act 1908 replaced the existing Trustees with a Corporate Trustee Company being the Sydney Bethel Union Pty Ltd. The four retiring Trustees at that time became Directors of the new Company.

At the end of 2021, two long serving Trustees/Directors retired being Graham Lightfoot after 26 years, 12 years as Chairman and Peter Lovell after 19 years, 7 years as deputy Chairman.

In 2022, the SBU celebrated its 200th anniversary of continuous charitable services. Details of the celebrations can be found on this website.

In August, 2023, the SBU Chairman, Clive Goodwin, retired after an extraordinary 41 years as a Trustee/Director. He was deputy Chairman for 24 years and Chairman for 9 years. Llew Russell was appointed Chairman and David Parmeter was appointed deputy Chairman.

The Sydney Bethel Union is proud of its record of continuous philanthropy which has benefited succeeding generations of seafarers of all nationalities and creeds who have passed through Sydney and neighbouring ports.

More detailed historical background will be found on the Australian Milestones page on this website.