

The Church on the Corner

A History of Selwyn Anglican Church Mangere East, 1863 – 2012

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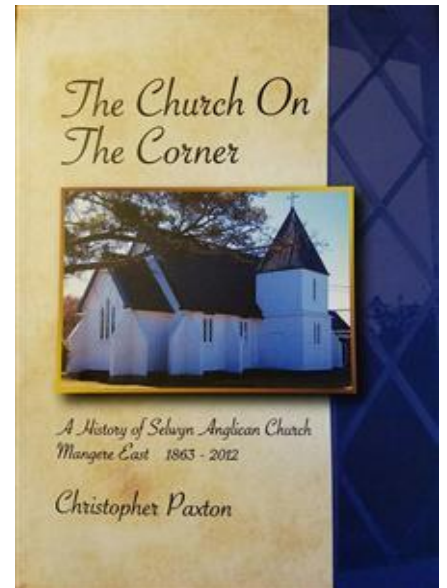
Christopher Paxton has authored an attractive history of the people of Selwyn Church and their place of worship. Growing from Holy Trinity, Otahuhu, its story gathers momentum in the social and industrial context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as local farming moved to progressively heavier industry. Employment became focused in candle and soap production, fertilizer factories, freezing works and associated abattoirs. By the late 1920s the railway workshop redevelopment gave new impetus to Mangere East's residential development and the 1863

timbered church building was moved from Otahuhu by traction engine and rollers in 1927, the gift from the parent parish marking a watershed in the development of the local church. Originally dedicated in 1863 by Bishop Selwyn it was rededicated in 1928 by Archbishop Averill and renamed as 'Selwyn Church'.

Worshippers in the newly acquired church faced serious adversity with the onset of the Great Depression, with 'hundreds of families of the parish out of work' and in poverty. Meagre financial assistance by government, evictions of rent defaulters and inadequate relief schemes for unemployed workers brought financial difficulties for many Anglican parishes. Christopher Paxton conveys a sense of the widespread deprivation and personal crises which only began to be resolved with the election of the first Labour Government in 1935 on policies of full employment and relief of poverty culminating in the 1938 Social Security Act. But as that healing took effect the disruption of World War gripped all communities, though it is strangely absent from the narrative. For this reader, as a schoolboy at Otahuhu Primary in the war years, the U.S. military presence, men and matériel, was pervasive in the area after 1942, and the absence of local men of conscription age had social consequences and impacts on parish life and ministry which are not mentioned. The story jumps too quickly to the post-war era.

The continuing strength of the fellowship is delineated well. Ladies Guild and Sunday School, picnics and fundraising for a new hall and the uncertainties of 'repair or replace' decisions relating to the church building – the latter decisions settled later by the daunting conservation project achieved with community and institutional support by 2012. Vignettes of parish life enliven the chronicle. Revd Bill Vercoe's priesthood in the 1960s is seen as the touchstone for 'Selwyn Church's long golden summer' with voluntary participation of many kinds strengthening the congregation. 'God's Gang' youth ministry, along with Scouts and Girl Guides stimulated more lay leadership – not least the innovative 'Extension Guiding' which gave opportunity in the local community for girls and women with handicaps or special needs

Demographic changes after 1970 and trends affecting the wider church challenged Selwyn Church to adopt new ways of ministry and mission. Paxton relates the initiative of Bishop Gowing and the diocese



to form a Team Ministry together with Mangere Central and Mangere Bridge but identifies inadequate consultation by the diocese as a cause of tensions and difficulties which disrupted patterns of church life through role confusion resulting in loss of parishioners. Yet the radical changes gave positive results outside the church walls. Widespread unease relating to gang problems amongst Māori and Pacific Island youth produced Joint Youth Teams '**J-teams**', comprising clergy, police and welfare officers. From the Mangere East base, under the Revd Ben Te Haara's guidance, they patrolled--*incognito*--the streets and haunts of south Auckland in the small hours, to offer counsel and advocacy, to prevent juvenile crime, and to improve community relationships and understanding. Four years later in 1975 Mangere East withdrew from the team and reverted to its Parochial District status and boundaries.

Yet the local church's ministry amidst socio-economic injustice was to be sustained and deepened. Paxton's account of community-facing ministry under the Revd Jean Brookes, the first woman to become vicar, followed by Co-Vicars Vicki and Peter Sykes reveals a growing commitment to new paths of Christian service and care in a marginalised community. Prophetic ministry increasingly crossed boundaries of cultural, racial and gender distinction. Ecumenical as well as ethnic collaboration found expression in a neighbourhood development scheme, skills acquisition, bicultural partnership in licensed ministry, and women's resourcing and Christian education initiatives. But the congregational cost was a further draining of members depicted as weary of change and conflict. Local Shared Ministry was then attempted but questions of funding and the shape of ministry scuttled its promise – seemingly neither diocese nor parish, singly or together, could meet the costs of such ministry. It is sobering reading. Paxton's narrative draws to a close portraying a small resilient group of lay volunteers continuing to undergird faithful clergy in tikanga-based arrangements, then in short-term and medium-term arrangements with part-stipendiary and voluntary rostered priests. With much personal sacrifice such ministry continued to nurture the people in pastoral care, liturgy and administration, and as best able, persevering with that strongly defining spirit of '*The Church on the Corner*' which looks beyond its own boundaries. Christopher Paxton's book is an historical case study of congregational mission in a time of acute social change. It is a worthy inspiration - and cautionary tale as well - for clergy and congregations embarking on community- facing local ministry.