

Eleven

From Hippie to Biker

I needn't have worried. I should, I suppose, have had more confidence that if God had set me off on this track he would give me the opportunity and resources to follow it through. He did, but we had a few dodgy moments on the way.

We had some immediate difficulties to face. We already had the second edition of the paper pasted up and ready to go, but no money to get it printed. It had aroused enormous interest among certain elements of the youth culture and letters requesting the next edition were flooding in. We could have used some of the three months' salary from Campaigners, but I'd given them an undertaking that I would only use the money for my family's domestic needs, not for establishing a new breadwinning base. We needed \$450.

Glena said, 'I believe God is with us in this. Go ahead and publish it. You won't have to pay the bill for a month.' But I wasn't so sure. I had absolutely no support from any outside source that could finance either the paper or anything else. And in 1972, \$450 was a lot of money. But Glena was firm. She made me send it to the printers.

Later that same day, two cheques arrived in the post. They exactly covered the amount we needed. They came from two anonymous Adelaide University students who knew nothing of our circumstances, but just felt they ought to send us some money. It was stunning.

The paper duly came out but under a different title. A lawyer friend had warned us that we ought to change because there was an existing sexy Melbourne tabloid of the same name. It could lead to litigation if we weren't careful. We were reluctant to change the name because even though there had been just the one edition, we'd had hundreds of letters and many requests to republish. To change the title could be confusing.

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Soon after, Glenna and I were reading the Bible when we came across that simple but powerful statement by Jesus, ‘You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’ (liberate you). Now, the word ‘liberation’ was very big at the time, both in secular revolutionary and Christian movements (Women’s Liberation, Animal Liberation, Liberation Theology etc.). Since liberation meant freedom, we decided to change the paper’s name to *Truth and Liberation*. We needed a name to call the trust we had to set up to receive any funds we were sent for my ministry, and so struck were we by the concept that we decided to call ourselves ‘Truth and Liberation Concern’ or ‘TLC’ (‘Tender Loving Care’). It might sound a bit dated now, but it meant a great deal to us at the time. (We later worked separately under the name ‘Care and Communication Concern’, which has now become ‘Concern Australia’. The original organisation has continued with a more local suburban ministry. None of the current leadership were with us at the founding of the paper or the name.)

I wasn’t left idle either. I received a lot of invitations to visit high schools and to speak at universities and other Christian gatherings. But once the three months’ pay had run out we had no regular income. I was given some welcome help in sorting out my finances and setting up the trust by David Cummings, who was Australian Director of Wycliffe Bible Translators (he later became the International Director). But it took a while before funds came in.

There was one fortnight when we received just one dollar. We started eating our way through the contents of our cupboards. It was getting scary. On the way to speak at a high school, I stopped by the side of the road and prayed, ‘God, I don’t care if I have to eat grass, but I can’t expect my family to do that. Please do something. Show me this isn’t some mad venture of my own, but that you’re with me—that this is right.’

When I got home, Glenna met me at the door with a big smile. She was holding a fat envelope in her hand. It had been dropped in earlier that day by a group of Christian students from Monash University. Knowing how little students had to spare, Glenna said, ‘I’m not going to open it; it might be only a few single dollar bills.’ It wasn’t. They had collected \$120. It covered the month’s mortgage repayment and food. It was quite amazing in its timeliness.

Although they were difficult days, I have to say they were exciting too. Glenna and I found our faith and our beliefs tested almost every day in some way. But God kept smiling on us and providing for us in remarkable ways.

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Everything was done from home. Glenna not only looked after the two children but also acted as a super-efficient secretary and book-keeper. Her days as a legal secretary were not wasted. She enjoyed the involvement, but it took its toll.

For quite understandable reasons, the children began to object to the amount of time their Mum had to spend on the phone. Before long we were receiving more than thirty calls a day on our home phone—some of them complicated, desperate and lengthy. Sometimes when the phone rang, the kids would raise merry hell, getting into cupboards and generally creating mayhem. It was bedlam. But we survived.

Things must have begun to look up after a while, because I was able to buy my first motorcycle. I can tell you, it wasn't a decision I came to lightly.

I can date my interest in the bike scene back to the time when I was working for Campaigners. I was driving on the main route that takes you north-west out of Melbourne towards my old childhood haunt of Bendigo. I was mid-way through my shift from straight to radical at the time—orthodox on the outside but beginning to be keenly concerned about the people on the fringe.

As I drove along, I passed a sizeable bunch of rough bikers parked by the side of the road. They all wore the same emblem, a kind of coat of arms, on the backs of their jackets. They were obviously one of Melbourne's outlaw bike clubs. They weren't doing any harm to anyone—a few of them were tinkering about with their machines and the rest were lounging around sinking a few tinnies—but to an outsider they looked a bit menacing even so.

Oddly I felt a surge of compassion for them. I thought to myself, *Here's a bunch of guys that no one will really want to know. I can't see the local minister making much headway with people like that.* I began to pray from that time that God would raise up someone who would be able to get alongside bikers and be able to show them something of the love of Christ. I felt a reply: 'Why don't you answer your own prayers?' But on that occasion I never for a moment measured myself up for the job. I thought I was too straight altogether. I just hoped there would be someone else around who wasn't.

Only a short while later, I went to a Christian youth camp and met Eddie and Elma Pye, a couple involved with youth work for a Baptist church. Eddie was British and had made something of a name for himself as a stunt motorcyclist, a sort of English Evel Knievel. He liked the way I approached kids and told me that if I really wanted to grab the attention of teenagers, I should get myself a motorbike. In response I said,

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‘Eddie, if you knew anything about my accident record you’d never even think of such a thing!’ But he kept up the pressure, convinced I should do something about it. He later became a valued member of God’s Squad Motorcycle Club.

As time progressed I began to meet a few bikers—people like Jim and others. And I was able to lead a few of them to the point where they decided to become believers. I began to get a feeling for what some of these guys were like. Despite their hard words and their hard living, they were often as vulnerable and as lost as anyone else. On top of this, the more I dug into Jesus’ life, the more I was challenged by his policy of reaching out to the people no one else would talk to. He was prepared to meet with the despised tax collectors, the hated Samaritans and, of course, the ostracised lepers.

I began to ask myself who the Australian equivalent of a leper was. I reckoned it probably had to be the outlaw biker. The Hells Angels and the many other outlaw bike clubs were both feared and loathed by conventional people. They kept the bikers at arm’s length and the feeling was mutual.

All these thoughts sat at the back of my mind during 1970 and 1971. In the meantime Eddie persuaded me to join forces with him to make some inroads into the motorcycle subculture. Together we formed the ‘Christian Motorcycle Association’. Norm de Vaux, owner of the New Gippsland Seed Farm, had a bit of spare land and offered us a paddock that we could use for dirt-track riding. So we’d hold dirt-track meetings where fringe bikers could race around the track. Then we’d finish up with a barbecue under the stars. Eddie and I used these opportunities to talk to them about our faith and their problems. These weren’t outlaw club members but loners. Through them I began to find out just a little bit more about the bike scene.

In 1970 I was invited to speak at a large annual Christmas–New Year youth event on the Gold Coast in Queensland. I was surprised to meet among the one thousand youth delegates a bunch of guys on big motorcycles, mostly Harley Davidsons. They came from Sydney where their leader, Paul Eddison, a mechanic and all-round great guy, had just formed the club in order to get to talk to bikers. Motorcycle clubs have distinctive names, so they had to decide on a suitable club title. Because they are outlaws and take pride in being renegades, bike clubs have tended to choose names that stand as a challenge and an affront to more conventional society. The last thing they want to appear is nice. In Australia, for example, there are the Devil’s Henchmen, Undertakers, Outcasts, Huns, Satan’s Cavalry, Fuehrer’s Curse, Black

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Uhlans, Iron Horseman, Filthy Few, Coffin Cheaters, Immortals, Vigilantes, Satan's Sinners, Outcasts and so on.

This bunch of Christians were operating from a different point of view from that of traditional church. They wanted to meet their biker mates on their own terms, but they needed a name that reflected what they believed. At the time, a popular American 'hip' detective TV series called *Mod Squad* was in vogue in Australia. A girl suggested that in line with this, 'God's Squad' might be a sharp name. So the club became God's Squad.

Every bike club has its own colours or patch, sewn usually onto a denim or leather sleeveless jerkin or waistcoat, called a 'cut-off', which is worn over your leathers. The Sydney God's Squad had designed an emblem which featured a scarlet Celtic cross with another, smaller black cross in the centre and the legend *God's Squad* in gothic script above it. It was very much in keeping with the bike club ethos.

We got on famously. They sat me on the back of their Harleys and I began to get a taste for the joys of motorcycle riding. I was impressed by their courage and their convictions, and we kept in fairly close touch when I returned to Melbourne. I helped them as a pastor and they helped me understand the ins and outs of the bike scene.

Forming a Christian-based motorcycle club (with a less middle-class name than Christian Motorcycle Association) seemed the best means of making contact with the biker fraternity. The more I thought about it, the more God seemed to be saying to me that I was the one who ought to be talking to bikers. It was as if all the changes developing in me over the last few years had this purpose in mind. This was a task I was destined to do.

It was, too, a question of putting my money where my mouth was. If I was convinced that Jesus' example led me to show his love to those people no one else wanted to know, and if I had identified the outlaw bike scene as just such a community, then what alternative was there? But it wasn't logic that drove me to get involved with the bike scene. It was an increasing sense of God's call that I could no longer ignore.

If you get the impression I was reluctant, then you'd be right. Initially I wasn't drawn to bikers in the same way I was drawn to the hip and rock culture. My own spiritual pilgrimage had led me to identify strongly with the anger, confusion and aspirations of that counterculture generation. Despite their waywardness, they were often protesting against the same things I wanted to change

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Like them I had learned to reject violence, to love peace, to admire the beauty of the countryside and also the beauty of people. The counterculture was a creative movement. It spawned music, poetry, literature and art—all of which I loved. And it had its intellectual side. Wherever you went, especially in universities, you met inquisitive minds, debate, argument, wit and good conversation.

It had also made a dent in the myth of the macho Australian male, though looking around today, not a lasting one. I think masculinity has a place, but so does gentleness and sensuality. One of the gentlest and most sensual pieces of literature in the world is the Song of Solomon in the Bible. It's a beautiful piece of erotic love poetry. God isn't simply portrayed in the Bible as a figure of strength and judgment. The prophet Hosea describes him as picking his people up in his arms and holding them to his cheek like a loving father attending to his children. And, of course, Jesus comes off the pages of the New Testament as both tough and eternally gentle—tough-minded and tender-hearted.

Personally I've always loved things which are soft to the touch: the delicacy of a baby's skin, the warm fur of animals, the quality of silk and satin. And while I enjoy the driving rhythms of rock 'n' roll, I also respond to lyrical, melodic classical music. The passion and sensitivity of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, Mahler's Fifth Symphony, Beethoven's piano concertos or Wagner's *Taunhauser* held as much a place in my heart as the raunchy blues of Southern Lightning and the driving energy of AC/DC so loved by bikers. There is a quality of what might be described as femininity that men can and should discover in themselves. The traditional gruff quality of maleness often disguises an inability to deal with those entirely legitimate feelings.

Some of the values of the bikers cut across those ideas. There were some attitudes I found, and still find, offensive. I wasn't attracted to chauvinism or violence, devotion to a limited range of music, or a philistine approach to the finer things in life. But in following the historic Jesus I felt a call to be 'a friend of publicans, sinners and other outcasts'. I discovered that 'one size fits all' is an unfair stereotype of any subculture. Within club life there exists a wide range of personalities.

Going on a mission to 'outcasts' might sound patronising. It isn't. I have never seen people who wear colours and ride motorcycles as in any way inferior. I didn't get involved in the bike scene out of any Victorian sense of pity. It was really a case of them being there and of God saying to me, 'They're people as much as anyone else. Go out there and show them you think so.'

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And, as I will explain, I found among bike riders other qualities which would put many Christians to shame, especially in their loyalty and deep friendship. There is also among them a brutal honesty that demands nothing less than respect in return.

I should state clearly for the record that although from this point in the story I became involved in the outlaw biker scene, it has never been my whole life. Throughout this period I continued to work in churches, high schools, universities, colleges, at public events and on the streets with a complete spectrum of people. I still do. I have been described as a ‘biker priest’ and I love my brothers and sisters in the bike scene, but I don’t want to misrepresent myself in any way.

Chronologically, the formation of *Truth and Liberation* street paper came first, and my work as an evangelist and Bible teacher continued throughout this period. While I was engaged in my internal tussle about reaching people on the bike scene, I was still working from home, rushing around with prodigious energy, speaking here, there and everywhere. I was also editing *Truth and Liberation*, whose second edition ran to 10,000 copies. It passed the 35,000 mark very soon after. Things were moving at a hectic pace, which has hardly diminished since.

As I travelled around speaking, I began to share my developing vision for some kind of ministry in the bike scene. Eddie Pye, who had sown that seed thought, was still right there with me, and one by one other Christians with an enthusiasm for life on two wheels introduced themselves to me. It became clear that in and around Melbourne there was a group of people who felt the same way I did, and they were committed enough to do something about it. What’s more, they knew a whole lot more about bikes than I did. It became clear we had the makings of a motorcycle club of our very own. It gave me a tremendous buzz to know that I wasn’t on my own in what a lot of people must have thought was a crazy scheme.

With the agreement of the Sydney God’s Squad, we decided to form a Melbourne chapter of the club on somewhat expanded and reviewed lines. Our theology was less fundamentalist and our mission theory based on a far more counterculture commitment. ‘God’s Squad, Melbourne’ was a revised vision that pre-dated the meeting with the new Sydney group. If we’d wanted to we could have started an entirely separate operation, but this seemed both pointless and egotistical. The guys in Sydney had come up with an ideal name, and as far as we were concerned, they wanted our guidance in mission ideals.

As chaplain, the Sydney guys offered me the God’s Squad colours to patch up whoever I felt was suitable. I had already come to understand the serious, sacred

nature of the colours, and felt it inappropriate culturally to skip the mandatory outlaw 'nominee', or 'prospect', period required to earn the right to fly them. They were more than happy for me to get going, but after a period I followed accepted motorcycle club practice, took half a dozen nominees, and travelled to Sydney to receive, as the original members, the right to wear colours.

There were weaknesses in thinking and practice in the Sydney club which eventually led to its dismantling not long after Melbourne's initiative. I gave all the support I could pastorally, but Sydney was a long way off. In many respects, our own shape was quite unique and vastly different in the way it worked. Because I had started a radical movement prior to this, and because I had reshaped the concept, I have commonly been called the founder of God's Squad. Since the Melbourne chapter continued and became the charter chapter of the other chapters in other states and overseas, the title is accurate with respect to God's Squad in its existing form.

There were seven of us who made the trip to Sydney, and this small band of original Melbourne Squad members became known as 'The Secret Seven'. There was myself, Eddie Pye the stunt rider, two schoolteachers, an insurance clerk, a leather worker and a civil servant. Each was a remarkable character in his own way. All had an incredible amount of commitment to the work, and a genuine love for bikers and riding.

One guy, Roly Smith, deserves a special mention because of the toughness he had shown in coming to terms with a genetic malformation that left him with only one workable foot and a withered arm. To that stump was attached an artificial forearm and metal claw. He still rides his 80 cubic inch Harley, adapted so that the controls are all on one side. On his left arm the metal claw grips the nearside handlebar. With the bike circuit's penchant for nicknames, he inevitably became known as 'Claw'.

We flew colours on May 13, 1972 and entered a self-imposed three-month probationary period before the official launch of the Melbourne God's Squad in August of that year. We were then a club in our own right, able to add other members and award them colours without reference to Sydney. John Smith, son of a Methodist minister, one time right-wing straight, was now President of God's Squad, a motorcycle outfit. It was hard to believe, especially for me.

My first bike, a Honda 500cc four cylinder bike, seems a bit tame these days when most club bikes are at least 1000cc Harleys, but in 1972 it was reasonably respectable. Few of us could afford a Harley at that stage, and there was not then the stigma attached to Japanese bikes that there is now.

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The bike was delivered to my door. I thanked the delivery-man, put on my new leather jacket and decided to try it out, wisely in the company of a seasoned rider. In those days in the state of Victoria, as long as you had a provisional licence, you could hop straight on a bike as big as you liked, without any experience whatsoever. I sat astride this new machine at the top of the hill outside my house, feeling very ill-at-ease, only too conscious of my accident-littered past.

I examined the bike closely and then, with a lost expression, turned to my companion in acute embarrassment. ‘I know this sounds silly, mate, but where’s the gear shift on this thing?’ I asked. Having received my first lesson, I set off gingerly down the hill. Within twenty minutes, he had run into the back of me. He had been looking over his shoulder, quite unlike his usual careful style, and looked forward just too late to avoid collision with my almost stationary bike.

Although some might find this beginning a bit dumb, the issue was commitment. If I was serious about the calling to do it, there had to be a starting point, even if there was little previous experience.

(My second bike, which I bought a few years later, was smashed up almost before I’d gone anywhere on it. I’d ridden to Gippsland with the Squad and was sitting on a new Kawasaki 900 when this loony biker came roaring across the field, doing doughnuts. A doughnut is when you hit the front brake and allow the back wheel to arc around in a circle, leaving a circular scar in the grass. This jerk came screaming across the paddock and did his last donut, straight into me.)

I had to learn to ride quickly. A group of guys gathered around me, most of whom were experienced riders, some of them with ten or more years in the saddle. I was almost thirty years old, and while I wasn’t exactly beginning to feel my age, I wasn’t the young daredevil I might once have been. I didn’t quite have the carelessness that comes with reckless youth. But nevertheless I had enough of a sense of call to make me put up a good front for the guys I was riding with. After all, I was the President and founder of the club, and that was something to live up to.

In the bike scene, if you’re the leader, then you have to lead the pack. So with gritted teeth I’d lead off, pushing myself to keep a decent pace, riding harder than I really felt was safe. In those early days, I would lean into the curves but my spirit would sit bolt upright, rigid with tension in some of the tighter bends—especially on wet nights looking into oncoming headlights on high beam! My stomach would churn with acid heartburn out of sheer anxiety. It was months before I felt confident enough to take to these trips with ease.

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As you can imagine, I had my fair share of falls. In biker parlance it's called 'dropping' your bike. Well, I dropped mine a few times, which caused a great deal of hilarity and mickey-taking from the rest of the guys.

But it wasn't all due to my habit of attracting disaster. My Honda Four was a real mongrel of a bike, and from the start we knew something was not right with it. The problem took a long time to diagnose, but in the end we discovered that salt water must have got into the petrol tank forming rust residue while it was being shipped from Japan. The needles and seats in the carburettor would clog up so that fuel would spurt out of the overflow tubes, where the wind carried it onto the back wheel. As a result, if you were driving in damp conditions, the tyre would turn slick and slippery, especially treacherous when you were going around curves.

Two accidents and a couple of close calls have been the result of deliberate attacks by car drivers. Wearing a back patch on a big bike certainly invites trouble from some drivers. It's a lonely trip to be run off the road, injured and bemoaning a damaged bike at 2 am. It was a healthy experience to ride a mile, so to speak, in somebody else's boots.

I remember one particular occasion when we were going over the Black Spur out of Melbourne. This mountain road has some sharp curves, and I was riding with some of our most experienced riders, who were right up my exhaust pipe. I was not feeling too happy, and as usual was pushing myself to my limits. I was aware of the bunch behind me, but I was just beginning to pick up confidence when the bike went from under me. The road was wet and, unbeknown to me, the fuel overflow tube was spraying fuel onto the rear wheel. Petrol and water don't facilitate traction! Fortunately there was no oncoming traffic and the guys following me took evasive action.

There were a few moments like that. The worst in the early stages was on an occasion when I was due, oddly enough, to speak at a businessmen's breakfast. Although I didn't quite look the part, I was still ready to speak to anyone who wanted to hear more about what difference Jesus Christ could make to their lives. The roads were very wet and as I braked for some traffic lights, the back wheel, sprayed with petrol, slid out and failed to hold its own on the surface. Down I went in a heap. I hit the ground thumb first and drove the first joint out of its socket and back so that it stood poking out at right angles to the back of my hand.

I rode straight to a public hospital where they stated that my thumb needed x-raying. But they decided it wasn't worth getting a radiographer in to do it before their shift

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began later that morning. In considerable pain, I then rode to the businessmen's breakfast where my words were warmly received. Returning to the hospital, I had to wait until 2 pm to be attended to. The doctor then made three abortive attempts at forcing the thumb back into place. I was in sheer agony.

To me, this was another example of how people on the fringe without power and status are treated. On a later occasion, when we took Lyndal to a public hospital to have her bandages removed some time after intricate plastic surgery to her face, we had to wait from 10 am until 5 pm. Handcuffed criminals and ethnic migrants shared our fate also that day.

When the Honda Four's end came, in fairly spectacular circumstances later on, I wasn't sorry to see it go.

All this sounds as if riding a bike is purely a hazardous and hard occupation. Certainly you're vulnerable on two wheels, and wet or cold can make life unpleasant. But in the warm weather, with a gentle breeze in your face, it's a fantastic way to travel.

I first sat astride a motorcycle with nervousness, but despite the hazards I quickly became an enthusiast. Nothing beats a bike for getting through traffic, and the growl of my Harley is music to my ears. Since the beginning, I've graduated from my Honda Four, to a Kawasaki 900cc Z1, to a Harley Davidson 1000cc Sportster—then from a second Sportster to a 1340cc (80 cubic inch) Harley Limited Edition Heritage Softail. Now I ride a Harley Ultra Classic Electra Glide FLHTCU (Centenary Model).

But it's one thing to master the rudiments of a powerful machine, to overcome fear and learn to enjoy the experience. It's quite another to get out and earn the respect of outlaw bikers, some of the most hardbitten men you're likely to meet in the country of Australia—or any other country, for that matter.



Wedding of Bearing and Dee 2013



Broadford Hells Angels Festival. God's Squad attended for many years.



Broadford



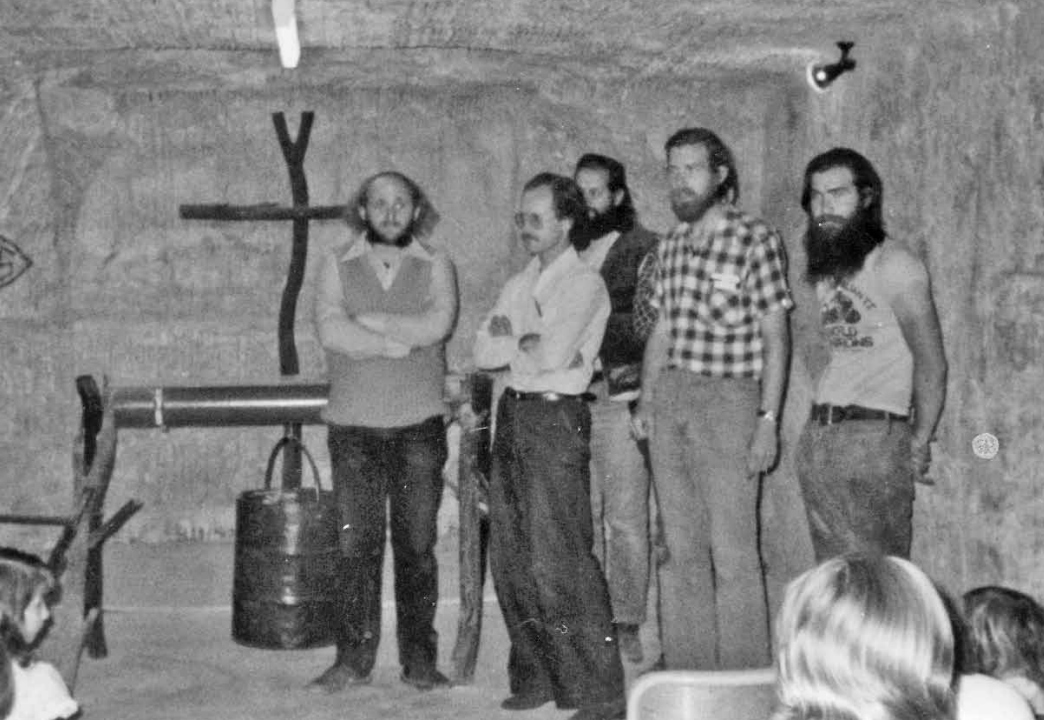
Sunday church, Broadford



Broadford



Presentation at Richmond RAAF Base NSW



Underground church mission Coober Pedy opal fields—Nov. 1980



Hunter Valley three week mission



26th January 1994—picked up by chauffeur driven car for Moorabbin City



2003 With WA Governor (later Governor General)



Collingwood Education Centre Building—1988



Collingwood Education Centre—St Martins, 1988–1991