From Five Barley Loaves: 
Australian Baptists in Global Mission 1864-2010 
Edited by Tony Cupit, Ros Gooden and Ken Manley 

Preston Vic.: Moasic Press 2013. ISBN 9781743241004 (paperback). $49.95 

In 1885 Silas Mead, first pastor of Flinders Street Baptist Church in Adelaide, preached on feeding the 5000 and likened the first missionaries they were sending to the ‘five barley loaves’. These five women, who seemed so insignificant for the challenge of mission among millions of Bengalis, were the start of the global mission sending of Australian Baptists. Mead became recognised as the father of the Australian Baptist missionary movement. One of the women, Ellen Arnold, served for 49 years, the longest serving of any Australian Baptist missionary although many more were to follow. From Five Barley Loaves is the comprehensive history of the people sent and the cultures engaged, the local partners and the innovative strategies of Australian Baptist global mission over the last 150 years.

The story starts with mainly women missionaries, who visited Indian women in their zenanas. For 80 years the mission focused solely in India, seeking to reach Bengali Hindus and tribal Garos. I was fascinated to read of Hedley Sutton, a missionary in Mymensingh who attempted to pioneer the Vernacular Training Institute for Bengali pastoral training. He was architect of Australian Baptist Foreign Mission (ABFM) field manual and instrumental in bringing together the station committees. Although invited to be first General Secretary of the Mission, he declined so he could continue serving in Bengal, where he acted as Field Council Secretary. Returning to Melbourne, he became Vice-Principal of Carey Baptist Grammar from 1923, and also ABFM Board Chairman 1935-1943. The work in India is noteworthy for the large Baptist Church of Mizoram in Assam, North-East India, which has now sent its own missionaries in partnership with Australian Baptists. It is also significant for the areas that in post-colonial times became Pakistan and Bangladesh. The ‘New Towns Policy’ and incarnational contextualized outreach to the Bengali majority community was fruitful and had significant lessons for future work in other countries.

The next chapter was when mission work spread to Papua New Guinea after WWII at the urging of returned Baptist chaplains. Highlights were revival among the Enga people at Baiyer River and the Min people near Telefomin. But there was also Bible translation, valuable health and educational services that were part of nation-building, and the development of the indigenous church through to handover and partnership. The story unfolds as the mission expands. Workers were sent into Indonesia – firstly among the tribal Danis in Papua, then into Timor with theological and broader vocational training. A bigger step was to pioneer in Africa, initially in Zambia and Zimbabwe with healthcare and theological education, South Africa for a time, and then focusing on the Yawo with village evangelism in Malawi and Mozambique. New work in Thailand included a diversity of incarnational initiatives by a multicultural team focusing on Thai Buddhists, including
outreach on the edge of Tanon Tok slum and ministry among HIV/AIDS sufferers. There are fascinating stories about innovative ministry platforms in Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Cambodia and China. Mission workers have responded to individual calls or opportunities in Hong Kong, Philippines, Singapore, Hungary, Nicaragua, Vietnam and Lebanon. Across outback Australia, the mission has come alongside the indigenous church, encouraging them to develop traditional indigenous corroborees and iconographs and locally appropriate leadership models.

The book traces missiological trends and locates the history of the mission in its regional and global contexts. Throughout the narratives there are lessons to learn from an overview of mission issues spanning three centuries related to missionary support and finance, the role of the ‘missionary wife’, missionary children and their education, cross-cultural teams, people group adoption, the Non-Residential Missionary, contextualisation and localisation. Missionaries show innovative approaches to getting visas and making a contribution to their adopted country – from involvement in healthcare, education, community development and teaching English through to innovative business as mission including ecotourism, guitar teaching and beauty consulting. And there are helpful models of inter-mission cooperation, from early days in PNG where the mission field was divided to avoid overlap, through till today in Thailand and Cambodia where a number of mission organisation work cooperatively under the one organisation.

A recurring theme is the commitment to develop the indigenous church and work towards handover and partnership. These are among the most exciting sections, reading of missionaries moving on from pioneers and teachers to partnering with the local church. This is a natural post-colonial shift as the balance of Christianity has shifted from the West to the global South. The shift towards partnership as a global mission agency is reflected in name changes of the mission. The State missionary societies started forming in 1864. After almost two decades of discussion they came together as ABFM in 1913. They left behind the racial superiority implied by ‘foreign’ by renaming as Australian Baptist Missionary Society (ABMS) in 1959. In 2002 they adopted Global Interaction to refocus away from their national and denominational ties, and avoid the tag of ‘missionary’ and the outdated idea of a ‘society’, and instead celebrate their global action and service in partnership or exchange with others. This is reflected also in their latest mission statement, ‘to empower faith communities to develop their own distinctive ways of following Jesus’.

This history is the definitive work on Australian Baptists in global mission. It draws extensively on primary documents and participant. The three editors were joined by six other writers; historians, mission leaders and long-serving missionaries. The result is a thoroughly-researched and rigorous treatment of Australian Baptists in Global Mission, which is also a pleasure to read. From Five Barley Loaves is essential reading for Baptist missionaries, supporters and pastors, but also of interest to all mission leaders, teachers and strategists navigating the way forward for global mission in the 21st century.