

From the Archives - How did the influenza outbreak of 1919 affect St. James?

There have been several newspaper articles about the ‘Spanish flu’ pandemic that struck the world 100 years ago, beginning in Melbourne in early January 1919. The Australian death toll was around 15,000, within its population of 5 million, and 40% of the population was infected.

Public events, like church services, were closed from February 2nd and people were required to wear face masks in public, although an article in the Geelong Advertiser 7th Feb 1919 reported government advice stating that church services could take place indoors if congregations wore masks or outdoors without masks.

I looked to the parish monthly newsletters, “The Messenger” to see what impact this had on St. James’.

“Our Vicar, returned to Ivanhoe on Friday February 14, and... quite a number of parishioners gathered in front of the Church to give him a first and cheery welcome back to his parish. On the afternoon of the 16th a larger number gathered on Mr. Amos’s lawn [120 Marshall Street] to give him a further greeting” [Rev. Sydney Buckley had served as a chaplain with the army].

“Our open-air service on Mr. Griffith’s lawn on Sunday evening, February 16, was largely attended, yet there was room for a very much larger congregation.” [The Griffith home was next door to the church in Upper Heidelberg Road.]

The AGM, scheduled for 18 February was postponed. By April the parish picnic was cancelled:

“Bother the old influenza! Our picnic, always such a happy one, has had to be postponed till spring. But won’t we just have a doubly merry one then?... The Vicar has brought a number of flare rockets (made in Germany) and the sort our enemy used for signals to their artillery, specially for the party.”

By May 1919 Rev Buckley had resigned and Rev Stephen Martin, from Deloraine, Tasmania was appointed, commencing early June. However, his family's arrival was delayed due to a shipping strike.

“Owing also to difficulties in the way of holding meetings it was not until the 27th October that Mr. and Mrs. Martin were formally welcomed by the congregation.”

In September 1919 the Vicar's column in the newsletter suggested that influenza had struck his family:

“The influenza epidemic has sorely interfered with many activities, but we are glad to know that it is now abating, and most thankful that the latest wave has been far less virulent in type than hitherto. Personally, I wish to thank all of you who by kind inquiry and little gifts of eggs and fruit, etc., showed your sympathy and ready help in the time of sickness at the Vicarage, coming as it did before we had time to unpack or furnish the house. It was rather awkward, but I am glad to say that all has gone well, and at last we feel at home again.”

The 1920 Annual Report shows some of the repercussions of the influenza:

“It has to be remembered also that for three or four Sundays in January and February no services were held in the church, and, consequently, the receipts were low. The Vestry wishes to point out that under these adverse circumstances the regular giving in accordance with the envelope system is solely responsible for the present favourable state of our finances.”

We now live in a very different world, and medical understanding of viruses is greatly improved. We know that meeting as usual but outdoors is not sufficient ‘social distancing’, but we now have the ability to link most of us via the internet.

Louise Ryan
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