Eastern Orthodox in Australia

Godley, Stephen and Hughes, Philip J. The Eastern Orthodox in Australia, Canberra, Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research/Australian Government Publishing Service, 1996.

From the BIMPR series - Religious Community Profiles

From Chapter 1 - History: Eastern Orthodox Churches in Australia

Like all Christian churches in Australia, the Eastern Orthodox Churches are immigrant churches, and this fact has characterised their presence in this country. The Orthodox Churches were established here for the spiritual and pastoral care of those Orthodox Christians who decided to make their lives outside the traditional boundaries of the mother church. The Orthodox Churches did not see this country as a mission field (although they are always happy to welcome anyone seeking spiritual fulfilment in the Eastern Orthodox faith).

As far as one can tell, there were no Orthodox Christians in Australia in the early colonial period. There are no names listed in the records of the First Fleet which are at all likely to have belonged to an Orthodox family. After 1810, however, some Greeks made their way to the convict colonies of Eastern Australia.

The first Orthodox service in Australia took place at Easter in 1820 at Kirribilli Point, Sydney, celebrated by a visiting Russian Orthodox ship's chaplain, for the members of the ship's crew. A similar event took place in Melbourne in 1862.

In 1896, a Greek Orthodox priest conducted regular services in Sydney and Melbourne. But the first Orthodox Church in Australia was established in May 1898, in Surry Hills, Sydney, and was dedicated to the Holy Trinity. This was established by the joint efforts of people from various Orthodox backgrounds.

As the numbers in the various migrant groups increased, the Orthodox churches became established along 'ethnic' lines, looking to the pastoral needs of the various groups, especially by ministering to them in their own languages.

In 1924, a Greek Orthodox diocese in Australia was established by the Patriarch of Constantinople, and the first bishop arrived with the title of Metropolitan. In 1959, the status of the diocese was upgraded to Archdiocese, and the Metropolitan now bore the title Archbishop. This was followed by a period of significant increase in the number of Greeks migrating to Australia following the Second World War. The Archdiocese has been divided into several districts with an assistant bishop in charge. There are now well over 100 parish communities, a theological college, several monasteries, and church schools throughout Australia.

Early in the twentieth century, there were in Australia many Russian refugees from the Far East due to the Russo-Japanese war. For a short while in 1916, they were ministered to by a Russian priest from the United States, but he soon left. There were more waves of refugees from the Far East after the Russian Revolution. These people came under the jurisdiction of the Russian Synod Abroad, which had split from the Patriarchate of Moscow and until today, most, but not all, Russian Orthodox churches in Australia belong to this jurisdiction. The first permanent Russian Orthodox priest arrived in 1922, and the first church was built in 1926 in Brisbane.

Although there were some Serbian settlers in Australia before the First World War, it was only with the great influx of displaced persons and refugees after the Second World War that there were enough to organise separate Serbian Orthodox parishes. Because of political differences, the community divided into two groups, those loyal to the Patriarchate in Serbia, and the Free Serbian Orthodox Church. Quite recently there have been significant steps in reuniting them. The first parish was organised in Sydney in 1949, and in 1973 Australia and New Zealand became a diocese under its own bishop.

After the emergence of the Autonomous Orthodox Church of Macedonia, separate parishes for Macedonians were formed in Australia also. The first church was consecrated in Melbourne in 1960. The independence of this Church was proclaimed unilaterally by the Macedonians and is not recognised by the other Orthodox Churches.

The first Ukrainian Orthodox priest arrived via Germany in 1948 as a displaced person and settled initially in Canberra. In the following years more priests and faithful arrived, so that parishes were soon organised in all the major cities. They, too, have had their divisions and their history is complicated, but as recently as 1990 they have become united under the jurisdiction of a Ukrainian Orthodox church in the United States. However, they do not enjoy the recognition of the canonical Orthodox Churches.

The Antiochians (then known as Syrians) were amongst the groups that helped establish the first Orthodox Church in Sydney in 1898, and for many years took part in joint services with the Greek Orthodox. The first Antiochian parish with its own priest was established in Sydney in 1913, and a second parish was set up in Melbourne in 1937. In 1969, a bishop was sent for the newly formed diocese of Australia and New Zealand, after which, with increased immigration, the Antiochian Church experienced great growth in the establishment of new parishes.

The consequent development of the various jurisdictions of the Orthodox churches in Australia has closely followed the patterns of migration of the individual groups. Church buildings, the appointment of clergy, especially bishops, the founding of schools and social welfare services have been in response to the needs of the communities.

One significant feature of the growth of the Orthodox Church in Australia is that lay people preceded the clergy, particularly the hierarchs, in arriving in Australia and establishing communities in the name of the church. This reversal of what may be regarded as the 'natural' order for establishing ecclesiastical communities (it might be expected that the clergy would arrive in new territory to set up communities and evangelise) may be a factor in later disputes within the various jurisdictions, particularly over the ownership of church properties (the properties were owned by lay committees, whereas usually they are held in trust by the hierarchy), and over the constitution of the particular community under Australian civil law (the founding lay committees may have established their communities according to one civil law while the hierarchy would have preferred another).

There are two other events of note in the history of the Orthodox churches in Australia. Firstly, the establishment of the Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Churches in Australia (SCCOCA) in September 1979. (See the list of Canonical churches in chapter 4.) While the various jurisdictions until this time had always co-operated with one another, particularly in ecclesiastical matters (e.g. the supply of a locum tenens when a parish priest was absent), there had been no formal links between the separate administrations other than the fact of complete inter-communion which is a feature of Orthodox churches worldwide. SCCOCA provided that official body which would be able to speak with a common Orthodox voice, particularly on social issues, and offered the opportunity for inter-Orthodox liturgical celebrations. For some, SCCOCA was also seen as the seed of a future Orthodox

Church of Australia (not just various jurisdictions in Australia), when all Orthodox Christians in this country would be united under one administration - a natural goal, as all Orthodox churches are already united theologically, doctrinally and sacramentally.

The second important event was the setting up by the Greek Archdiocese of Saint Andrew's Greek Orthodox Theological College at Redfern in Sydney, in 1986. No longer would prospective candidates for the priesthood have to travel overseas for their theological formation. And because all Orthodox churches are one theologically, the College has begun to train priests from all jurisdictions. The churches are only just becoming to feel the benefits of a locally born and educated clergy.