

- Steve Bartlett: So Steve Bartlett and I serve as director of ministries for the Baptist association in new South Wales and ACT.
- Steve Bartlett: I think my earliest memory is when I saw it emblazoned across the Harbor bridge at the turn of the millennium. And it was just one of those moments that you think this is a significant, significant moment in history. Um, but to have that word in that space at that time, it was quite special,.
- Steve Bartlett: I think because the word eternity is something that connects it's, there's a sense of hope. I think that comes with it a sense of, um, bigness, a sense of that. This is, this is something beyond the every day and that really connected with the moment as we moved into the new millennium.
- Steve Bartlett: I was, uh, I was watching it on TV actually. Uh, and so in some ways that was great because you, it was just right in front of you and you're watching it with friends. Uh, and I think I was, I think I was out in the Bush with a whole group of friends in the back of Sydney and, uh, we had an enjoyable night and then the fireworks come on. And then, uh, you realize the significance of the, you know, the date and all that means for you personally in your own life and the lives of those you love and the friends that are around you and then this word comes up and it was quite a moment.
- Steve Bartlett: No, no, not personally (hadn't seen it written on the streets). No, no. I saw, I mean, I knew the story of it and I had had seen obviously photos of it, but no, not myself.
- Steve Bartlett: Yeah, I had heard of him (Arthur Stace) and I've heard of the story cause it's part of, I guess, part of the Baptist story and the Christian story in, in this city. And so, yeah. And, and then making that connection on that night, it was a significant one. Yeah.
- Steve Bartlett: Today? Well, across Australia, (the Baptist Church is) a movement of probably about a thousand or more churches that into local communities, all sorts of communities across the state, you know, city country, um, churches in different languages that reflect the diversity of, uh, of who we are as a nation. And I think churches, uh, committed to the welfare of their local communities and the community more broadly, the practical welfare, the spiritual welfare. Yeah.
- Steve Bartlett: Well, in the 1900s, there were similar values to what we see in the Baptist church today. I think that that sense of commitment to the local community, that sense of welfare for people in all of the facets of their life, the recognition that we live holistic lives. And of course that was in an environment of great struggle for lots of people,

you know, that the aftermath of world war one, the great depression, that was a time in which, um, people were really struggling to find meaning and purpose in many, many cases. And, and the Baptist church was a church that wanted to be in that space talking, uh, the everyday level with people and, um, in, in the situations they found themselves in. Yeah.

Steve Bartlett:

I think that over the years leading up to the middle of last century, it (the Baptist Church) had found an Australian voice. Now the heritage of Baptists was British Baptist that now we wanted to take interest in the welfare of the new colonies. And, and, um, so there were people that would come and join Baptist churches in Australia when they moved here. And then there are others who joined churches that started here. And then over the first 50 years of, of the 1900s you know, the church increasingly spoke with, uh, with an Australian voice we was the connected and resonated with every, every man, every woman in the street. Yeah.

Steve Bartlett:

Yeah, yeah. Well sort of the Baptist Tabernacle and Burton Street of course is where the Eternity Playhouse Theatre is now, uh, was a building that was built around that, um, between the late 1880s, early 1890s, uh, church on the Eastern side of Sydney that was at that time, you know, how local residents and, um, it was built in a couple of stages. And by 1991, it was the, the envelope really of the building that's there now was there. And it's been there since then. Was it by 91? Yeah. Yeah. 1891.

Steve Bartlett:

Yeah, well, it was, I mean, it (the Burton Street Baptist Tabernacle) was a, it was a landmark and its local area and it was a place of gathering. It was a place where, where people came to share, um, community share life's journey with one another, uh, share their faith with one another. It was, it was on one of the main corridors into the CBD. And so it drew from people all around that area who wanted to, um, be part of that community and, um, the East, the Eastern suburbs, but also people in the CBD itself who are business people and people who might've been really struggling and homeless people as well. And then over times as the, uh, in its hay day, it really had an, almost a regional focus. Some people used to travel in as well to it. And so it sort of had quite a, quite a profile in the town of Sydney at the time

Steve Bartlett:

It was really a cross section of people across society (who attended). So there was, there was people who were really on struggle street in the local area that were part of it. There were people who lived in the really well-to-do suburbs to the East. There were business people. There were people who lived in the inner city more broadly. And then there were people who had once lived there and that had moved out perhaps a little bit further into the suburbs, but still maintain this connection because of the sense of community that was there.

- Steve Bartlett: Sure. Yep. Well, in the mid 1930s, they would have experienced a bit of a buzz. I think it was the church was packed every Sunday. There were loads and loads of kids that were picked up and brought and, and, and had time spent with them and, and programs run for them at the building. It was a, it was a place of vibrancy. It was a place where people spent the whole day often. And, uh, and it was a place of connection. And not only what happened within those walls, of course, because the Burton street church itself lived not only within the walls, but out of the walls, as well as it, as it ministered and connected with people in the broader community.
- Steve Bartlett: Yeah. Outside, outside the four walls, then it was going into places of need in the community and helping meet those needs. It was, um, it was taking, uh, the, the, the message of the Christian faith onto the streets and speaking about on the streets, which was something that was often done in those days. And, and it was also connecting with people in their own environments and inviting them into this place of community.
- Steve Bartlett: Yeah. That, that John Ridley outreach was something that happened regularly. In fact, it happened regularly across many churches in, in our city at that time, not just Baptist churches, this was something that was done, you know, across the, the Christian community more broadly. And certainly at Burton street, uh, the, the ministry that John Ridley had there in that those particular nights of our meetings was something that he would have done in different places. And also Burton street would have done regularly as well. It was part of the rhythm and the fabric of the life of the church.
- Steve Bartlett: Yeah, sure. Well, Arthur had had his own spiritual awakening a number of years before at Saint Barnabas and Broadway on a meeting that was probably looked quite similar to what was happening with John Ridley at Burton street. But, uh, there was some, there was something about John Ridley that, um, he wanted to connect with and he found himself there. And I'm not sure that we're actually a hundred percent sure why or how he ended up there. But what we do know is that was a very significant night for him personally, and really for the city as we look at the legacy of it.
- Steve Bartlett: Well, I think that was the night in which, um, the John Ridley spoke a talk that was very significant for Arthur Stace and it was on the subject of eternity. And, uh, uh, Arthur had already, as I said, come to understand a bit of, uh, who God was for him and he was on a spiritual journey, but, um, but John Ridley was, uh, spending time really, um, emphasizing that we needed to take into account eternity that life wasn't just about the immediate and the needs that we might have in the joys and the sorrows of the immediate. But, um, there, there was a whole eternity that we need to consider and, and towards the end of his talk, uh, John Ridley said, I just wanna, I just want to shout the word eternity throughout the streets of Sydney. And, and in that moment, there was something very profound that

happened for Arthur Stace and he took that word and he walked out of the church and took a piece of chalk out of his pocket and wrote for the first time, uh, in really in brilliant copperplate script, which he never quite understood how he had that capacity. He just, um, to do that, he wrote the word eternity, the first of what would be half a million times by his own admission that he wrote in the decades that followed.

Steve Bartlett:

He was, yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, so I mean, John Ridley had his own spiritual awakening actually at Burton Street Baptist church, um, a number of years before the first world war and he enlisted for that war and, uh, came back and he was a decorated veteran. And through all of those experience experiences, he knew, uh, that life could be very dark at times. And he had a way of communicating and speaking that just connected with the ordinary person and, uh, with the tough times and the good times of life. And so, so it was that sort of capacity to connect and speak the language of the people that John Ridley had really a knack for and a gift for.

Steve Bartlett:

And that's what he did on that night. On the 14th of November, 1932, the second last night of a number of nights of meetings that he was holding at Burton street.

Steve Bartlett:

Yeah, well, um, the Burton street church had been used as a church for almost 110 years. And over that time, it had seen huge change in the, you know, the, the life of its local area. Um, really, uh, the 1900s were a time when there was lots of residences and residential development in the area itself, and then people grew up and then they moved away and they maintain connection. But I guess the vibrancy that was at Burton street was also being replicated in Baptist churches and other churches across the city. And so bit by bit people tended to move, to connect with a church in a community that was local to where they were. And of course this was before all the, the rejuvenation of residential development in the CBD itself. And so it came to the point where there was very few people who were local to the area. So then for a number of years, it was actually used by one of our organizations Hope Street, uh, which was working with disadvantaged and marginalised people. But in the end, there was the recognition that, um, this, this building had a story and a story that needed to be preserved, uh, for all of our sakes, for the whole city and that its value going forward would be in the preservation of that story, the preservation of the rich architecture of it, and the preservation of it is a gathering place.

Steve Bartlett:

Well, right from the beginning. Yeah, that's right. Uh, it's the stories. And of course the Christian story, um, and the interaction of that in people's lives was, was, was what it was there for from the beginning. And it has been a place where community, uh, of all sorts has been created and stories have been told. Yeah. And it's still that way today.

- Steve Bartlett: Well, I think this whole idea of storytelling, uh, you know, it, it was birthed as a place to tell the Christian story and, and it's still used as a place of storytelling. It's still used a place of gathering and a place of community. And, and so those things are continuing to just like they were, when it was first and when it was first built and first you used all of course, the stories are different now. And, um, I think the Christian story that was connected and spoke through that building in the first 110 years of its life continues to resonate through the and experiences of people who were there.
- Steve Bartlett: Well, it's, it's (Eternity's intrinsic attachment to the building in Burton Street) about this one night. Really? It's it's about this one talk that was spoken by John Ridley. It's about this one unlikely hero. Arthur Stace who would take that challenge to, to spread the word eternity over the streets of Sydney and go out and do that for the first time on the pavement outside just after the, the service or the meeting, and then would make a commitment of decades, um, when nobody even knew who he was to write that over and over and over again, and such to the point where there's the legacy now of multitudes of people who have been impacted by that and all of us, of course, when that Eternity word appeared on the Harbour bridge on the turn of the millennium.
- Steve Bartlett: Yeah. Well, it (Eternity) is really significant word. It's a word that speaks of possibilities and purpose and hope. And I think in the Christian story, it's this connection of eternity with every day that, you know, God who is eternal, um, wants to connect with us who are not eternal, wants to be involved in our lives and wants to give meaning and purpose to life and to living. And so we have our own opportunity to connect with the eternity story. Uh, and I think that's a really significant thing that brings hope and purpose for living.
- Steve Bartlett: Well, I've heard it said that eternity is the tagline of Sydney and in many ways that's true. I mean, we've seen it in so many places across our city, and I think it does connect with something inside of many of us for a desire, for purpose, a desire to see ourselves in the big, the big picture, the big story. I think of that moment when I saw it unfurled, uh, on the Harbour bridge, uh, on the beginning of the millennium. And it was just a moment in time when you thought I'm part of something big here and that goes beyond me and it's really significant. And so I think that, I think that sense of that sense of hope and purpose and forward-looking, uh, that's what is significant about the word for all of us.
- Steve Bartlett: Exactly, Exactly. If, if Arthur hadn't found himself in the building at that time, if Arthur, uh, if Arthur hadn't done that, if, if John Ridley hadn't spoken that message about Eternity, if it hadn't clicked with him, uh, then he would have not had that sense of life purpose and not lived it out for all of those decades in the way he did. It was quite a remarkable life, this unsung hero for 25 years or so, um, before it was even really discovered who he was. And so

for Arthur, this, this was a sense of purpose. This was a direction for him. This was almost what he was created for. And he lived it out, uh, day in and day out for decades.

Steve Bartlett: Without the Burton street tabernacle being there and without John Ridley speaking on eternity that, that night without Arthur Stace being there? No, no, the eternity story probably wouldn't exist.

Steve Bartlett: Well, I think in the Baptist church, we recognize that we live our lives in the light of eternity and we live for more than just the, now the now is really important and it often takes up so much of our time and energy, but we live for something bigger. And that is what gives us hope and purpose. And what directs our service in the wider community.

Steve Bartlett: Yeah, it's a, it's a, it's (the word Eternity is) a word of hope and a word of purpose. It's a, it's a word that, that speaks about that. Um, I'm made for something bigger than just what's happening, going on around me and I'm, I have worth as a person and, and, uh, I'm part of a big story, um, connected and that's great.

Steve Bartlett: Yeah, well, I describe it as something has become part of the fabric of our city. Really. We're talking about it now. How many years after was it? It it's come about because of this one, unlikely hero, I mean, his story in so many ways, resonates with the story of so many of us in the city. Um, just ordinary person and understanding and coming to understand what their purpose in life is and living it out and having an impact that was far beyond what he could have ever imagined.

Steve Bartlett: Yeah, you're right. Yeah. Whilst the message was eternal, uh, the chalk wasn't and I, I guess that, that for me is just a reminder that that message we have to keep reminding ourselves of. It's something that we need to keep fresh for ourselves. And that's what Arthur was doing. I mean, he went to different parts of the city. He went to different parts of the state actually at times to give that same message, that same eternal message in the immediacy of the day and the immediacy of the circumstances of people's lives. And, and it made impacts on, on people for a moment or a day, or perhaps even for much longer.

Steve Bartlett: I think he's (Arthur Stace) an unsung hero (of the Baptist Church). Yeah. Yeah. And I think he's someone that we look to and say, his story could have been your story or my story anyone's story. And it's a great example of how God would use us as we let ourselves be used for purposes that may be greater than we thought.

Steve Bartlett:

I'm Steve Bartlett. And I'm the director of ministries for the new South Wales and ICT Baptist association of churches.