**Let the Children Live Tauiwi Overview**

****

**Preamble:**

Conference 2022 marks the conclusion of the Connexional Vision ***Let the Children Live (LCL).*** The purpose of this overview is to look back and reflect on the 10 years of work that has taken place in response to the upholding of this vision – noting its origins and intentions, alongside the practical ways it was lived-out across the Haahi.

**Areas of Consideration:**

1. The origins of the vision and key areas that were to be addressed.
2. The funding of projects via the LCL fund and other notable projects and initiatives that were set up in response to LCL across the Haahi
3. What can we learn and where to from here for the Haahi

**“A Mission Priority” for the Church**

In 2011, Council of Conference brought to conference the suggested of implementing a Connexional Vision for the Haahi. This vision was in response to many of the social issues that were crippling New Zealand society at the time – Youth Suicide, Child and Family Poverty and Child Abuse.

After feedback from synods and rohe of the church and formation of the vision from a Council of Conference appointed workgroup, Conference 2012 adopted this vision as a 10 year Connexional Vision: *Tukuna nga mokopuna kia puawai – Let the Children Live 2012-2022.* In accordance with the reporting of Council of Conference to Conference 2012, LCL was suggested to be adopted as the “Mission Priority” for the church. Leaflets were distributed which stated

*“There is a silence in our churches and community around Youth Suicide, Child and Family Poverty, Child Abuse. The Methodist Church of New Zealand is deeply concerned about these issues. ‘Let the Children Live’ is our ten year commitment in response to these concerns.”*

From the outset, all levels and areas of church life were invited and encouraged to take the LCL vision on board and address within their own context and understanding. It was emphasized that the LCL was not a “top-down” vision, but one which ownership was to be taken by the various parts of the Haahi as it saw and deemed fit.

There was also a strong emphasis for LCL to support on-going work across the church that was already taking place to address the issues it sought to address. Sinoti Samoa were already in the process of delivering family violence workshops across its Itumalo’s during this time which aligned to the LCL vision. The Missions of the church were already deeply engaged in work which directly tackled these societal challenges. Examples such as these reflected the desire for the LCL vision to *both* support initiatives that were already taking place to tackle *youth suicide, child and family poverty and child abuse,* and also challenge the Haahi into looking at new ways to practically address these issues, and truly live out the LCL as a “Mission Priority.”

In the LCL vision early years, Council of Conference would regularly encourage parishes, synods and rohe to have time on their agendas to discuss, share and promote LCL projects and ideas. Some of the synods notably still regularly do this.

**Funding and the shifting of emphasis**

Obviously, if a strategic vision for the Haahi is to be implemented, there must be a financial backing of that vision to allow words become transformative action. Early on, there were discussions in Council of Conference around the need to fund this work, and also possibly fund a person to oversee this work. After an application was made to PAC, some funding was gathered to begin the work. In 2014, Conference assigned Mission Resourcing the responsibility of allocating moneys to the various arms of the Haahi, known as the *Let the Children Live Fund.* This fund was set up as a quarterly fund drop of up to 10 applications to the maximum of amount of $500 (and later $600) that may go toward a specific project relating to children or youth project in the church or community. As part of the application process, each successful applicant was asked to report back after their project to the Connexion via Mission Resourcing.

From this point, the LCL fund became the main way in which the church would actively live out the LCL vision. The vast majority of applications came from parishes, with a few from Missions and a few made as applications for funding to be used as donations towards outside community projects. Almost all applications were exclusively made from Tauiwi Parishes, despite the fund being recognized as a Connexional fund. There has only been a few number of times when there were 10 or more applications received in a quarter, despite Mission Resourcing promoting regularly the availability of the funding. Some of the key stats and information from the fund may be found below:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| YEAR | SUCCESSFUL  APPLICATIONS RECEIVED | FUNDS DISTRIBUTED |
| 2014 | 33 | 16,450 |
| 2015 | 21 | 7,100 |
| 2016 | 26 | 13,000 |
| 2017 | 26 | 13,000 |
| 2018 | 36 | 19,000 |
| 2019 | 40 | 24,000 |
| 2020 | 38 | 22,800 |
| 2021 | 30 | 18,000 |
| 2022\* | 15 | 4,800 |
| TOTAL FUNDS DISTRIBUTED\* | | **138,150** |

*\*2022 4th quarter funds yet to be distributed*

Funding applications could be categorized as either *internal* or *external projects. Internal projects* were projects which served a new or ongoing initiative within a parish and served the children or young people within that parish. Some regular applications included seeking funding for equipment and resources relating to Sunday School, funding toward costs for young people to attend camps or conferences, parish workshops, family outing events and more. Applications with focus on *External projects* supported applicant’s engagement with their local community or local community projects. These included funding around holiday programs, supporting mission relationships with local schools, parent and family support initiatives, community breakfast hubs and more.

The majority of applications received to the LCL Fund thus far have been *internal projects.*

**Other notable projects**

Across the Connexion, there have been many other notable projects beyond the funded projects which have been carried out in direct relation to the LCL vision. Synod-run national Camps held by Wasewase and Vahefonua carried the theme of *Let the Children Live* and included sessions based on youth suicide and mental health. Sinoti Tupulaga also prioritized workshops relating to LCL at their national camps and events. Synods have discussed LCL in meetings and shared in ideas and resources.

TOKO Collaboration Group was formed by Tongan Methodists and leaders in youth ministry in response to a series of deaths by suicide in the Auckland Tongan Community. TOKO worked collaboratively alongside churches (Tongan and non-Tongan) to deliver workshops and resources in the youth suicide prevention space.

Tauiwi Youth Conferences 2017,18,20,22 addressed LCL focus by providing workshops and resources in youth mental health, suicide prevention, emotional intelligence and well-being.

TCYFM collaborated with *LeVa* in providing freely funded youth suicide prevention competency training in the North (Hamilton) and South Island (Christchurch) – training 65 leaders with basic youth suicide awareness competency skills. It was reported 2 weeks after the initial training that these skills were used by two leaders who attended the training.

Resources online have been created and gathered, including a *Practical* *Theology of Suicide Prevention* and *Suicide prevention prayer* written by Rev. Greg Hughson, former chaplain of Otago University.

TCYFM also hosted a youth leaders professional development training which was run by Prof. Duffy Robbins, the then Youth Ministry Professor of Eastern University, Philadelphia.

This is not to mention the many parish-led community workshops on family violence, poverty and injustice – from VTOA congregations in the Auckland Manukau parish, to family budgeting workshops in Mt. Albert, Fetu Ao community Christmas project in Hastings, Arahaina Family Support from Methodist Mission Southland and countless others.

The church has, where able, engaged deeply and meaningfully with LCL over its life-span. For these initiatives and projects that have undoubtedly made an impact in the lives of children, youth and families – Methodist and non-Methodist – there should be acknowledgement and appreciation.

**What have we learnt and where to from here?**

Noting all of the work that has been done, and funding that has been given out, what learnings can be taken away? How are we to measure the effectiveness of the churches response to the original call for *Let the Children Live* to be adapted as the “Mission Priority” of Te Haahi Weteriana o Aotearoa?

If we are to go back to the original wording around the vision in 2011/12, it was clearly intended that LCL was to address youth suicide, child abuse and family violence. In fact, the original wording of the full vision, according to Council of Conference meeting minutes was actually supposed to read:

*Let the Children Live:* ***Ending Youth suicide, child poverty and family violence in Aotearoa New Zealand****.*

Somewhere along the line, not clear in recorded discussions, the decision was made to drop the second part of that statement and stick with *Let the Children Live*. It is interesting to note whether we are able to trace some of the funded projects back to this original intention.

Another interesting point of note is that, as alluded to earlier, with LCL being seen as a vision from which ownership would be taken by the whole church, there had not been in place any accountability metrics that could be used to track the progress of the Haahi throughout the 10 year period. To date, there had not been a review/overview taken at any of the last 10 years, nor did there seem to be a general plan in place to see what would be done after LCL concludes at Conference 2022. These are learnings which the church must consider in whatever vision is to come next, but also in relation to its strategic thinking and visioning.

**Youth voice**

One of the glaringly obvious things that stood out from the outset when sifting through Council of Conference minutes, notes and Conference decisions was that the implementation of the LCL came with little to no consultation with young people at all – despite its focus being all about them. It is a failure on the church to regularly discuss young people and issues relating to them but forget to consult with them from the outset. Had tamariki and rangatahi been involved in the early beginnings of establishing LCL and what it would look like, we may very well have seen the vision even more deeply implemented and lived out on all levels of church life. This again is a learning the church must consider in future strategic planning and visioning conversations.

As part of the series of leadership training events that was undertaken by Tauiwi Youth leaders in 2019-20, we engaged in a reflection talanoa – inviting youth leaders to honestly assess, from their context and perspectives, the role the church has played in helping to address youth suicide prevention. Some of the key quotes are as follows:

*A strong agreement across the Tauiwi Youth stated that “The Methodist Church of New Zealand are NOT doing anything in regards to Suicide Prevention and education”. The Tauiwi youth feel that most often the subject is ‘taboo’ and ‘awkward’ when discussed, especially in front of leadership groups or elders and is often ignored to prevent such situations. Tauiwi Youth has a strong sense of obligation to this issue because it affects them directly, most having had experienced someone close to them who may have tried to take their life or have died as a means of suicide. “It feels like the Church (MCNZ) does not care about them as a whole, mental health and wellbeing of an individual.”*

*Tauiwi youth have disclosed that these Influence sessions led by LeVa, were the “first real conversations around youth suicide as a part of a church gathering type thing.” It not only raised awareness but it challenged youth to break down stigmas and ‘awkward’ feelings when it comes to talking about suicide and identifying those at risk. The young people of Tauiwi feel that if Mental Health in general was discussed more in Church and cultural settings, we would be able to work towards tackling issues like suicide amongst our young people. Being able to get our Matua, elders on board would be a “major game changer” in raising awareness for suicide prevention and education in both Church and Cultural Context. “We need to learn to accept Suicide as a problem, not a sin.” Our youth strongly believe that by talking about Mental health and Suicide prevention openly, in a safe and respectful manner, will help breakdown these stigmas and normalise these conversations on a Church wide scale.*

*“You don’t need all the money or resources – you simply need to show us you care… Start simply with – Are you ok?” We often find ourselves trapped in a space unable to express our true feelings because our Culture expects us to behave and act in a certain way. Or are in positions that dictate how you speak, how you walk and dress, never asking the true and meaningful questions like, how are you today or are you ok?*

*The Tauiwi Youth of the Methodist Church of New Zealand would like to see more awareness in the Church when is comes to Suicide prevention and Mental Health in general. This issue is “SO REAL” for our youth that we would like to be part of a movement that will allow safe and respectful places for youth and other members of the wider Church to discuss ways of decreasing suicide rates. We would like more Influence Sessions that teach individuals and communities on how to identify those who are at risk and how we as a church community can help these individuals seek the right help they need. “Sometimes there’s more to it than just praying for that individual to NOT take their own life”.*

*“Being vulnerable does not make us weak. We just need the support, or to know that you GENUINELY care”.*

With consultation between the Tauiwi Youth Ministry team, TCYFM Coordinator and Mission Resourcing Directors, we would like to see that the Methodist Church of New Zealand | Te Hāhi Weteriana o Aotearoa establishes a ***Connexional Resource Team on Suicide Prevention and Mental Health.***

We envision this group, comprising of health professionals from within the church and people passionate about the issue at hand, would be tasked with resourcing the Connexion on *all levels* in areas relating to Suicide Prevention Awareness and Mental Health.

Some work of the team may involve the following:

1. Working with presbyters, synod leaders and key youth ministry leaders to see that they are equipped with a competent level of suicide prevention training and on-going professional development.
2. Developing contextualized resources which can be used across all cultural and geographical synods in the church.
3. Increasing accessibility to current resources and material which already exists but is not promoted enough within the life of the church. This includes working alongside groups and organisations which already carry out this vital work in their context.
4. Advocating for Youth Suicide Prevention and Mental Health on behalf of the Methodist Church to the wider society.
5. Working with church communities to break down barriers that prevent suicide and mental health being openly talked about – particularly for young people.
6. Holding the church accountable to the Connexional vision *Let the Children Live* beyond the life of the vision.

We are open to further consultation with the wider church to refine/edit/add to some of the above.

We believe that by establishing this team, we might be able to address some of the issues voiced by our young leaders in the statements that have been made. More importantly, we believe that this gives the church an opportunity to actively play our part and be at the forefront of seeing youth suicide prevention and mental health awareness taken seriously. This is an urgent call to action. One which we must be responsive to. One which we must act upon and act now.

**Conclusion:**

Statistically, if our aims were to reduce these statistics or eliminate these problems entirely, we can say that we did not do what we set out to do as a church. That being said, visions are not always about final destinations, but rather the strides taken towards that are worth note and recognition. The church has gone far to tackle these issues, but is yet to go far enough.

We must acknowledge so many faithful serving Methodists – from parishioner to Connexional leader – who played their part to *Let the Children Live.* As the vision draws to a conclusion, LCL arguably becomes even more important than during its 10-year life. The church cannot rest on its laurels, or check a box and move on to the next priority. It must now prove that the issues Let the Children Live was imagined to address will indeed continue to be “Mission Priority” to Methodists, even when there is no regular push for it to remain at the forefront of our thinking.

Thanks be to God for huge work that has been done, and more importantly, the work is still come.