



## Conference 2023 An Overview

Ady Shannon

The Covid-19 pandemic taught us many things. Some of those lessons learned have proven to be gamechangers long beyond the impact of sudden lockdowns, closed borders and event disruptions. Hosting virtual meetings is a Covid legacy and Conference 2023 was a showcase for how church and business can be effectively and efficiently conducted when most attendees are participating remotely from homes and venues throughout the motu.

A core group of church leaders and support personnel gathered at the Hastings Wesley Community Centre from Tuesday 7 November to Saturday 11 November to roll out a hybrid style Conference that brought together more than 200 offsite members of Conference, lay representatives and observers. This edition of Touchstone includes reports from committee Convenors capturing the key work, ministry and mission undertaken over the past year, along with Conference decisions that will influence the future. This article is written from my perspective as an observer sitting in on the daily programme dispatched from the well-appointed Hastings Wesley Community Centre hub.

The recently opened Hastings Wesley Community Centre was the ideal venue to accommodate the daily needs of the leadership, support and technical team. Following several months of regular online planning meetings, the Conference arrangements committee was primed and ready to deliver a polished, professional and well-orchestrated online operation.

Conference reports were pre-recorded in the weeks leading up to Conference, and the leadership team focused on ensuring the tightly scheduled programme provided adequate time for business, discussion, caucus sessions and reporting along with many breaks to accommodate the intensity of watching proceedings on a screen for the participants Zooming in.

### Wednesday 8 November 2023

President Peter Taylor acknowledged in his opening pōwhiri address the differences between an online Conference and a gathering of delegates assembled in one space. "This hybrid space is a bit strange for all of us. We miss the benefit of real people in the room but that does not mean the mahi will not be done. Above all it is important that we see God's direction as our source of hope".

The pōwhiri showcased the musical talents of Methodists of all ages and, along with the address from the President, Rev Iakopo Fa'afuata, Presbyterian Hastings Samoan Parish, presented a history of the Hastings Wesley Parish, including the evolution of the many buildings, people involved, services delivered, and mission undertaken since land was acquired in 1878.

### Service to Honour Those Who Have Died

A poignant and moving pre-recorded service to honour those who have died in the past year paid tribute to 16 presbyters, minita-a-iwi, deacons and lay people. The service included prayers and a selection of beautifully sung traditional Methodist and Māori hymns along with a brief tribute to each of the deceased capturing highlights of their lives and ministry.



### **Taking Care of Business**

The business agenda started on Wednesday afternoon – a combination of pre-recorded segments reporting on work undertaken by committees, followed by recommended decisions reported to Conference by convenors Zooming in in person.

In opening the session General Secretary Rev Tara Tautari reiterated the importance of consensus decision-making as an integral part of Conference. Moving from an in-person to an online Conference involves 'reading the Zoom room' when making decisions and Tara assured attendees that the leadership team would be closely observing online cues and symbols to ensure every voice was heard.

Technical team leader Michael Lemanu shared key messages from a Conference introductory workshop held the day before. The brief 101 tutorial covered the etiquette of participating in a virtual Conference from remote locations; microphones on mute unless talking, raised hand or chat option for questions and green hand symbol when indicating the affirmation of a decision. In general, the 'rules of engagement' were closely observed over the Conference duration, although calls for speakers to "UNMUTE" were common.

Reports were generally received, and decisions agreed on as a formality. Nan Russell, convenor Board of Administration, delivered an outstanding and comprehensive report on the numerous portfolios, Trusts and committees under her jurisdiction including some on topics "that people love to hate".

Conference approved a significant sum from the PAC fund to be made available for survivors who suffered abuse when in the care of Methodist entities or personnel, "We have to do the right thing and part of that is finding the money," Nan said.

Nan reiterated that the purpose of property is for the mission and work of the church. Work continues on the property strategy and following ongoing consultation a proposal will be presented at Conference 2024. Insurance is increasing the complexity of work undertaken by MCPC. Nan acknowledged with gratitude the work of the Connexional Office staff along with the numerous volunteers and board and trust members who support her work.

Special mention was made of the service and contributions made by Rev Siosifa Pole and Michael Lemanu who are both leaving Mission Resourcing for parish ministry after five and eight years in their respective roles - Siosifa as acting Co-Director and Michael as youth, families and child ministry Coordinator.

Closing comments and prayer from Rev Keita Hotere included special thanks and a salute to the presidential team, technical team, Connexional staff, the Wesley hosts and all the report writers for making day one a success.

### **Thursday 9 November 2023**

Opening worship and devotions curated by Trinity College included a powerful and thought-provoking nine-minute overview of the devastation in the Gaza strip presented by Rev Dr Miriti Raheb, a Christian theologian and academic from Bethlehem. Rev Dr Raheb's message gave voice to the 10,500 people (in excess of 14,000 at the time of publication) who have died and the 27,000 injured as a result of the conflict, 70 percent civilians. The presentation included graphic images of the devastation and tragic deaths of children, women, students, creatives, innocents all - with a commentary that summed up 70 years of conflict. He stated that rather than a conflict between two parties, this is a genocidal war that began when the State of Israel was established and the indigenous Palestinian people were displaced and left without a home. The settler versus colonials conflict and subsequent loss of rights for the Palestinians has resulted in a situation that many organisations have termed apartheid.

The presentation concluded with a call to stand up for justice against inequality by calling for an immediate ceasefire, and an open corridor so that the people in Gaza can get access to food, water and other resources essential to life. And he asked for prayers.



Conference decided to prepare and release a statement from MCNZ supporting an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and Palestine as a first step in reconciliation and peace. A draft statement prepared by the leadership team and released on Friday generated animated discussions. The official MCNZ statement circulated to the Connexion on Tuesday 14 November can be found in the article titled *MCNZ Statement on Gaza Israeli Situation*, on Page 13.

### **Help for Hawkes Bay**

The decision to relocate the proposed Christchurch Conference hub to Hastings was in response to a suggestion by Tau'ataina Tupou from the arrangements committee to provide support for the Hawkes Bay community in the wake of the damage caused by Cyclone Gabrielle.

A pre-recorded presentation fronted by Napier Methodist Parish steward Joanne Gaudin gave local context to the damage caused by Cyclone Gabrielle in the Hawkes Bay region, and the relief response that followed. Joanne and her husband James shared many challenges in the immediate aftermath of the floods when they were supporting family, parish and outreach in a region that was without power or communications for 12 days. They acknowledged that although it was a sad time for many – and in rural areas normalcy is still a way off as homes, businesses and farms have yet to be repaired or restored to a state of occupation or operation - the outpouring of love, generosity and kindness was powerful for the entire community. Holding Conference in the region was one way of MCNZ acknowledging the damage and supporting that ongoing recovery mission.

### **Report, Updates and Business.**

Much of the day's business focused on the Mission Resourcing review following a decision reached at Conference 2022. Rev Nicola Teague-Grundy and Rev Uesifili Unasa co-facilitated a caucus meeting for Tauwiwi and Rev Keita Hotere facilitated the Te Taha Māori caucus meeting in a process effective in bringing consensus to the decisions proposed. It was agreed that a separate Transition Team would be established to bring a smooth change to the work of Mission Resourcing, and that Synods and Hui Poari would be informed of developments in the transition process to be completed by Conference 2024.

Social services reported on the numerous aspects of advocacy, mission and service provision they are engaged in including addressing the increasing lack of safe, affordable, dry, warm, accessible housing for the elderly who do not own their own homes.

**Friday 10 November 2023** Rev Keita Hotere and Vice President TeRito Peyroux-Semu opened the day with devotions, prayer, reflection and song themed around climate justice. Dr Ruby Manukia- Schaumkel, MCNZ legal advisor and convenor of the Law Revision committee, presented a report on the work to date revising Section 8 of the Law Book. The disciplinary process and procedures are being revised to reflect a restorative justice process rather than a retributive process. Restorative justice respects both the victim and the perpetrator, asking the questions; Who is hurt? How can we bring healing? A draft review will be presented to synods and Hui Poari for comment. Following consultation, changes will be ready for a decision at Conference 2024. Conference attendees were invited to gather in breakout rooms to discuss and share examples of where restorative justice has been used in practical ways.

Shared feedback included some inspiring examples of where the restorative justice approach worked effectively and resulted in positive outcomes exceeding expectations, restoring mana and healing hurts.

A pre-recorded video presented by Rev Kalolo Fihaki, Vahefonua Tonga o Aotearoa Synod Superintendent captured the essence of the enormous recovery response rolled out in Auckland, Northland and Hawkes Bay by Siaola, Vahefonua's social services mission. Their swift and well-coordinated efforts capitalized on their exceptional work and experience gained in response to their coordinated Covid-19 recovery response. When the state of emergency was announced in February 2023, Siaola promptly swung into action, galvanized extensive resources including people, food and products to help the affected communities. A total of



1062 families and individuals benefited from their response that included food, care packages, blankets, towels and counselling from social workers who were part of the response team.

The programme included the launch of a resource created by Mission Resourcing, titled *Rekindling the Vā of Papatūānuku*. The book acknowledges our connection with creation and the responsibility that comes with it by sharing climate justice stories, personal perspectives and life experiences from a range of diverse Connexional representatives. Rev Siosifa said, "Our hope is that this narrative will inspire readers to reflect on their own climate justice experiences. We need a unified approach to the devastating impact of climate change to our planet."

**Saturday 11 November 2023.** Morning devotions were led by President Peter on the Conference theme of God, Our Source of Hope.

### Recognition of Retirees and Others

The session devoted to recognising the contribution of retiring presbyters Fatuatia Tufuga and Kathryn Walters and hosted by So'otaga Misikei was poignant, funny, sobering, inspiring and uplifting. Time was also dedicated to tributes and reflections from others moving into new roles – Rev Siosifa Pole and Michael Lemanu - and the past Presidential team – Rev Setaita Veikune and Rev Nicola Teague-Grundy - reflecting on their term 2018 - 2020.

### Signing the Journal & Wrapping Up

The day closed with the Covenant Service, celebrating and affirming the work, deliberations and decisions of Conference. The service was bookended and punctuated by outstanding choral performances by the local Tongan Choir and the Hastings Samoan Choir.

**Conference 2024 will be held in Wellington. 8 – 13 November.**



### Conference 2023 Comments Worth Sharing

Ady Shannon

There were many memorable Conference comments - here we capture just a few of the choice comments, shared collectively and as asides ...

Conference Chaplain Rev Tovia Aumua addressing Conference participants. "We are united as we come together for action. There is gravity in our mission ahead."

Rev Keita Hotere at morning tea after the opening online pōwhiri. "This is so much better."

Nan Russell in response to suggestions that Professional Development Grants limit of \$10,000 is inadequate for training purposes. "We have a finite amount of money and an infinite amount of need."

Nan Russell when asking that the report be received and offering to answer questions after the delivery of Rev Dr Susan Thompson's report whose presentation was unexpectedly bombed by her dog Felix – to the amusement of everyone watching. "Felix is not taking any questions."

Nicola Teague-Grundy on presenting options going forward for Mission Resourcing, "Sometimes you have to take a leap of faith without having all the answers."

Carol Barron responding to tributes from Methodist Alliance personnel. "It has been a great privilege to have been in the role. The work has been varied, challenging and absolutely rewarding."



Rev Siosifa reflecting on his past and particularly his time at 409, thanking many people for the support, love, laughter, leadership that he has received in his ministry. "The church today is so diverse, culturally, theologically and in languages. My aim has been making resources more connexional to serve the many and varied needs of the connexion."

TeRito Peyroux-Semu thanking Michael Lemanu. "What a blessing to be witness to the last eight years. Thank you for your honesty, care, determination, passion, drive, support and knowledge. And for your cultural competency, generationally and socially. Michael you are a leader, but you are engaged in the grass roots, making it more authentic. ... We are so blessed for your service and ministry, your care in your role and mostly for your mana. ... Thank you for your parents who laid the foundation that prepared you for this role. We are fully blessed and grateful for the opportunity to acknowledge this path in your journey. Thank you for all you have done thus far and we look forward to the journey ahead for you."

Michael Lemanu in response. "Thank you for reading the brief I sent to you! I acknowledge the opportunity of working alongside colleagues from across the Connexion and getting an understanding of what a connexional church really is by working at 409. I want to recognise as well all the unsung, invisible volunteers and acknowledge the leadership, pastoral care, knowledge, mentoring and support of Setaita and Siosifa."

In reference to the decisions regarding Mission Resourcing Michael Lemanu asked Conference, "Are we jumping off the titanic before we hit the iceberg?"

And Michael posed a challenge to Conference. "I want to encourage us to look at ministry to children and young people and uphold the values and service to young people".

Rev Setaita reflecting on her past term as President. "It was an experience and a blessing that I will hold dear for the rest of my life. I gave it my all. I am grateful to God for all that was done. I give God the glory. I am grateful to Nicola for all the time we spent together, we cried together, prayed together and we ate together. And to the church for giving me the opportunity to learn to listen. For the love, trust and support I received. I apologize for all that was done that was not what you expected or liked."

"It was a blessing to represent MCNZ and apologize and say sorry to those survivors who have been abused in the care of the Methodist Church. To witness first-hand the reconciliation power of God and the healing was one of the most important moments of my life. I salute the present General Secretary for going further, deeper, wider into bringing healing."

"I thank our chaplains Jill van de Geer and Te Aroha Rountree who did more for us than the church expects. They were always there for us. With us."

Nicola Teague-Grundy reflecting on her term as past Vice President. "I was proud we were the first female team leading our church. We were two very different women from very different backgrounds. We struggled, laughed and cried together. My advice to the new team is, Get to know each other well, then you will back each other up. ... Leadership roles in church bring hard times and good times. "

Rev Kathryn Walters' pre-recorded interview with So'otaga Misikei was a highlight as she talked about key moments in her spiritual and ministry journey. At Bible College she realized that she was "not just a Pentecostal, evangelical Christian. It turned out I was an enthusiastic Methodist" and those principles of Methodism have guided her life and ministry. The interview highlighted her remarkable gift for bringing sensitivity and humour to all aspects of her work. "I love to laugh. Humour is a leveller." Her advice to those considering ministry, "Take risks. Take chances. If you do that in faith and discernment, even if you are wrong you are right if you do it with God."



### Conference Highlights

Ady Shannon

Amidst many outstanding musical performances during the powhiri, a standout was a recording originally made for Conference 2021 by a Christchurch group of young musicians Sui, Fasi, Massey, Vaiuli and 'Ilaisaane.

#### Service to Honour Those Who Have Died

A poignant and moving pre-recorded service paid tribute to 16 presbyters, minita-a-iwi, deacons and lay people. The service included prayers and a selection of

superbly sung traditional and Māori hymns along with a brief tribute to each of the deceased capturing highlights of their lives and ministry.

President Peter congratulating and blessing Rev Dr Arapera Ngaha on her appointment as Tumuaki. Taiwi joined the President in acknowledging the importance and significance of this appointment and shared their anticipation of working alongside her.

The appointment of a Taiwi Bicultural Workgroup.

Outgoing NZMWF President Tui Salevao sharing highlights of her past two-years as she passed on responsibility to a new team. Newly inducted NZMWF President Lesieli Pope three weeks into her new role, introduced her team and theme for the next two years; Grow in Christ and be a Life giver.

Law Book revisions will reflect restorative justice principles. President Peter referred to restorative justice as having the capacity to 'lower the temperature of the conflict'. The model of justice will be a change for church and acts as an example as it incorporates many concepts already embraced and recognised by Pasifika and Māori including mana, aroha, koha utu, muru, tumanako, pono, and forgiveness.

Green grants have been a success; five applications have resulted in \$155,673.15 approval across the five projects.

A joint venture between Wellington based Wesley Community Action and Wesley Samoan Hastings Methodist Parish will see the provision of 12, 3- and 4-bedroom homes on a site in Flaxmere for families on the housing register. The collaboration benefits everyone involved.

MCNZ commitment to decade programme on Climate Justice highlighted with resources including a Climate Justice Calendar 2024 and new book, *Rekindle the Vā of Papatūānuku*, that shares stories of climate justice from a range of perspectives.

The presence of tamariki was a welcome blessing during Conference. Michael Lemanu was accompanied by his family, wife Eseta, 5-year-old daughter Amorangi, and sons 1-year-old Rāniera and baby Tohunga. In addition, TeRito's son TeAriki, and young members of the local parishes brought noise, vibrancy, cheer and laughter to the venue.

A video tour of Grafton Downs showed progress on the development and drew attention to the restoration and renewal of riparian waterways. Stage 9 is about to be released.

Conference recognized and paid tribute to the service and contributions made by Rev Siosifa Pole and Michael Lemanu who are both leaving Mission Resourcing for parish ministry after five and eight years in their respective roles, Siosifa as acting Co-Director and Michael as children, families and youth ministry coordinator.



## CONFERENCE

Carol Barron was recognised for the enormous contribution she has made to the Methodist Alliance and MCNZ over the past seven years. Carol is leaving in December. Her fierce passion for social justice, commitment to church, strong leadership and exceptional writing and research skills have made her an invaluable member of the team.

Conference honoured the term of the past Presidential team, the first ever comprising two women President Rev Setaita Veikune and Vice President Nicola Teague-Grundy 2018 - 2020.

The interview between retiring presbyter Kathryn Walters and So'otaga Misikei. The questions and the answers were absolutely on-point and inspiring.

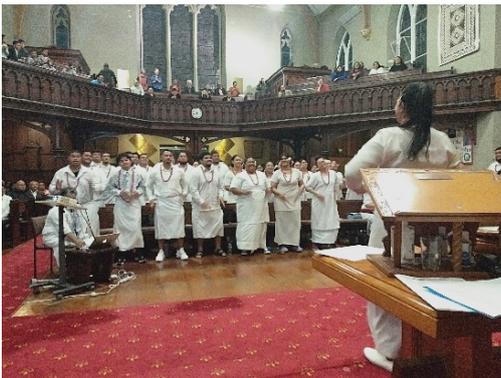
Singing at the Covenant Service by the local Tongan Choir and the Hastings Samoan Choir, accompanied by the extremely talented musician Rev Ieremia Amituana'i.

The amazing hospitality offered by the Samoan Parish catering team, under the direction of Olive Tanielu and her able assistants, Tumema Faioso and Sieni Fa'afuata. Outstanding food provided daily by a cheerful and dedicated culinary crew.

The tech team, pulling it all together flawlessly under the leadership of Michael Lemanu; outstanding operators! We salute you all. You are indeed MCNZ taonga. Sami Paea He Lotu Fifita, Katie Fifita, Felonitesi Manukia, Lavoni Manukia, Paula Moala, and Moeakiola Situ'a.



## AROUND THE CONNEXION



### Auckland Festival of Song 2023

Rev Norman Brookes

A statement by Rev David Bush prompted the inauguration of an annual Festival of Song in the Auckland region in 2013. David had made the case that apart from our gathering as the whole Methodist family at Conference, we generally operate in our ethnic silos, each doing our own thing. We in Auckland pondered that comment and identified music and song as two key components that bind us together as Methodists. Ten years on, the Festival of Song is a popular event that unites our Auckland Methodist family.

Charles Wesley's 7,000 hymns shaped early Methodism. Although the repertoire of his hymns has been whittled down over time, his gift of teaching theology via hymns runs deep in our bones. "Methodism was born in song" states the preface to the 1933 Methodist Hymnbook, the hymnbook many of our older English language members used in their youth. We are a singing people and that has touched Methodists of all ethnicities in this country.

Inspired by these things, we in the Auckland/Manukau region launched a Festival of Song. We had no idea how this would turn out but in faith we booked the Pitt Street Church as a venue and sent out invitations to all the Methodist groups in the region.

What happened? On that first night in 2013 we had a talented Korean choir, a North Harbour choir, a Tongan Youth choir from Ellerslie, a group of Wesley College singers, a choir from Mt Eden, and Samoan singers. President Rex Nathan gave a reflection based on, "Singing the Lord's Song in a strange land" and the large congregation enjoyed singing some of the great hymns of our Christian faith. The Festival of Song was born.

Since then, we have held the festival annually apart from a break caused by the Covid pandemic. This year our Festival of Song was held on Sunday 5 November and once again we were blessed with a range of participants: Samoan, Tongan, Fijian choirs, along with the Pitt St



choir, two singing groups from Mahurangi, a multicultural choir from Papatoetoe, a folk group from Birkenhead, and a duet from a Pitt Street couple.

There was some brilliant singing, and enthusiastic applause followed every musical performance. It was a time of inspiration and encouragement for all who took part. During the festival we honoured the late Professor Colin Gibson, singing two of his hymns, and we honoured the late Rev Dr Jim Stuart with two readings from his book, *The John Wesley Code*. Rev Dr Terry Wall gave a fine reflection reminding us that we are all worth everything in the eyes of God.

The Pitt Street presbyters and congregation have been great hosts for the past 10 years. Each festival has included a time for fellowship over tea, coffee and snacks in the church hall. We celebrate this coming together as a Methodist family and give thanks to God for the ties that bind us together.



### 800th Anniversary of St. Francis' Nativity Scene

Rev Dr Terry Wall

This year, to commemorate St. Francis of Assisi's vision of the nativity scene, an exhibition of '100 cribs in the Vatican' will be held to honour the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the first crib. Terry Wall shares the history behind the nativity scene that has inspired devotion in Catholic and Protestant churches around the world ever since the first iteration in 1223.

St. Francis of Assisi is perhaps the most revered of the saints of the pre-Reformation church. Born in 1182 into the family of a wealthy cloth merchant, he enjoyed a privileged and secure life. He served in the army and was taken prisoner for a time. It was through an encounter with a leper and some mystical experiences associated with a crucifix that Francis had a radical conversion that transformed his life. He felt called to rebuild God's church.

At the heart of Francis' understanding of the gospel were the evangelical counsels of simplicity, humility and freely chosen poverty. From being a soldier, he became committed to peace: from being proud he became humble and from being affluent he embraced poverty. Francis gathered around him a group of brothers who committed themselves to live close to the teaching of Jesus. He was affectionately called *Il Poverello*, the poor little one, which speaks of his humility and poverty. He cultivated a joyful spirit.

The rule that Francis developed for his community was so radical that Pope Innocent III hesitated to endorse it, suspecting that it was unrealistic. After revision, the rule was approved, and the community began its life of identifying with the poor and preaching the gospel. The brothers rejected material comfort and sought simplicity close to nature. Francis saw birds and animals as kin.

Central to Francis' spirituality was his wonder at the humility of God in the incarnation. He marvelled at God becoming vulnerable in sharing the divine life with humanity. His first biographer, Thomas of Celano, comments on what Francis saw in Christ: "Jesus embraced both the humility of the Incarnation and the clarity of the Passion because he came to love us by becoming one of us. Love was the reason for the Incarnation." This was a different emphasis from seeing the incarnation 'as a remedy for sin.'

Francis saw the birth of Jesus depicting the humility of God. We are told that Francis reflected upon these two realities almost to the exclusion of all others. He meditated on the text from St. Paul: "Though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty,



you might become rich." (2 Cor. 8:9) Through their poverty, having nothing to defend, his brothers could truly become peacemakers in the spirit of the gospel.

We believe that Francis spent the years 1219 – 1220 in the Holy Land visiting places associated with Jesus' life and ministry. He was especially impressed with a cave which was held to be the place where the Christ child was born. This was probably the inspiration for Francis wanting to recreate the scene when he returned to Italy.

In 1223 Francis sought permission from Pope Honorius III to set the scene for "the kindling of devotion" to the birth of Christ. With his special reverence for the incarnation, Francis wanted to show the poverty into which Christ was born, and the humanity of Christ who shared our often-precarious lives. Thomas of Celano observed: "toward the mother of Jesus he was filled with inexpressible love, because it was she who made the Lord of Majesty our brother."

Francis contacted a noble, John Vellita, whom he had befriended in the rural town of Greccio. He sent a message saying: "Giovanni, if you want to help me, this year we can celebrate the most wonderful Christmas ever ... In one of your woods, in Greccio, there is a cave similar to that in Bethlehem. I would like to represent the Christmas scene and see with the eyes of poverty in which the child Jesus came into the world. I want to see how he was placed in a crib and lay between an ox and a donkey."

Giovanni arranged for the scene to be recreated in the cave at Greccio. A manger was built, hay gathered, and an ox and ass brought to the cave. Francis and his brothers assembled with local people. Lights shone in the darkness and a priest presided at the celebration of the eucharist, with the manger as an altar. Francis, being a deacon read the gospel, sang and preached. He regarded Christmas as the Feast of Feasts. Deeply moved, he spoke with simplicity of the babe of Bethlehem who was born into poverty – a sign of the humility of God. Those worshipping experienced great joy.

The recreation of the scene of the birth of the Christ child made a deep impact on all who were present, fulfilling Francis' desire for it to inspire devotion. Thomas of Celano tells us: "There simplicity was honoured, poverty was exalted, humility was commended and Greccio was made, as it were, a new Bethlehem."

In 1291 the first Franciscan bishop of Rome, Pope Nicholas IV, decided that a permanent nativity scene be constructed in St. Maria Maggiore, a prominent church in Rome dedicated to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Francis knew that tangible, material reminders of events in our Christian story have power to evoke, nurture and confirm faith.

Along with St. Catherine of Siena, Francis is the patron saint of Italy. In 1979 Pope John Paul II declared Francis, patron saint of ecologists.



### **Wesley College A Centre of Learning and Success**

Rev Ali'itasi Aoina-Salesa

The 2023 year proved to be challenging for Wesley College in light of the Royal Commission and media attention. However, the school, its staff and its students persevered and continued to do what they do best. We highlight some of the year's events and successes.

The Service of Beginnings in February led by MCNZ President Rev Peter Taylor and Vice President TeRito Peyroux-Semu marked the official start to the school year. The Inter-House Athletics Day, also held in February, was a colourful, vibrant and strongly competitive day for all participants.



Culture is an important aspect of our school life and in readiness for the Polyfest Festival in Term 1, the school was represented on the Cook Island, Tonga and Fiji stages.

The Pink T Shirt Day held in Term 2 acknowledged the national campaign within schools against bullying.

Music is a strength that many of our students display, and this was reflected by the school band 'Tribe 801' competing at the annual Tangata Beats competition.

The Senior School Ball in July is an enjoyable annual event celebrating our young people.

In Term 3 the New Zealand Army Band visited the school and during chapel delighted us with their gift of music and song. The band rocked and so did chapel to the enthusiasm of the students.

The Spirit of Adventure event occurred in October and involved ten of our female students who thoroughly enjoyed the learning experience from being at sea.

Senior Prizegiving in November was a wonderful celebration of academic achievement by our Senior School. We congratulate 2023 Dux Falo Fifita and Proxime Accessit D'Artagnan Faitala.



Sadly, in October the Head of Music, Miss Anne Marie Lalakai passed away after a brief illness. It was a great shock to our school family and community. The Lalakai family graciously allowed their daughter to be brought home to Wesley one final time. The Service of Thanksgiving and Celebration was a tribute to her love of music and her ability to share that passion with students and staff alike. RIP Anne Marie.

On behalf of the Principal Dr Evans, staff and students, we thank you for your service to our School and extend the blessings of the Christmas season to all.



### **Vice President's Report**

Vice President TeRito Peyroux-Semu

Throughout the past year especially, I have had the incredible privilege and pleasure of consistently witnessing, meeting and even working alongside a multitude of highly talented, intelligent, creative, dedicated, compassionate and generous people and collectives within our hāhi. Many have graciously volunteered their time and efforts, going above and beyond expectations (and job descriptions), to wholeheartedly extend offerings of support, hospitality, understanding, patience, care, love and hope.

Leading up to, and during last month's Conference, this was no different. In fact, it was probably intensified, even as an online Conference. I want to take a moment to say ...

- Thank you to our orators and visionaries, who sometimes navigate multiple cultural and linguistic contexts, to bring wisdom and mana to our gatherings.



## VICE PRESIDENT'S REPORT

- Thank you to our creatives, who can use melodies, harmonies, colours, images or words to heal, soothe, connect, reinvigorate and inspire us.
- Thank you to all the writers and recorders, involved in the preparation and presentation of reports, stories, minutes and journals that have collectively captured the breadth and depth of our people, work, service and resources over the past year;
- Thank you to all the discerners and reviewers, involved in reflecting on, discerning, proofing, rewriting and revising our statements, decisions, prayers and articles so that they may better reflect the nuances and diversities of our hāhi and her journey;
- Thank you to all the critics and mentors, who gave honest and helpful critiques and feedback on processes and positions, because when we know better, we can hopefully do better;
- Thank you to all the knowledge holders, facilitators and information sharers who created and/or re-shared resources, information and opportunities for further enlightenment and understanding;
- Thank you to all the inquisitive problem solvers and calculated risk-takers, particularly those who navigated online platforms and technology, making the most of whatever they had on hand, to share our stories and help us connect from different corners of the country, while sometimes also running practice test runs, considering plan B through to Z alternatives, and leaving room for urgent, on-the-spot problem solving too.
- Thank you to all our nurturers and carers onsite in Hastings, and throughout the country, who provided acceptance, food, care and hospitality, not only towards us as Conference participants, but in some circumstances, even providing this for our parents, partners, children, mokopuna and fur babies, making things easier for some of us to be able to attend and participate in the Conference.
- And thank you also to all our prayer warriors, who have continued to uphold our world, our most vulnerable, our communities, our causes, our people, our ministries, our leaders, and our hāhi in prayer.

For various reasons, I have a wide range of different highlights from Conference. But as our country officially begins a term under the leadership of a new government that has been clear about its intention to cut back on and disestablish initiatives that were intentional in ensuring equitable support and outcomes particularly for Māori, and other vulnerable and marginalised groups in our society [aside from being concerned about this], I am strengthened by the fact that from Conference, as a hāhi, we have not been afraid to identify, call out and challenge systems that have and continue to colonise and undermine our peoples and our planet, nor will we be afraid, as we move forward.



## THEOLOGY

### Bethlehem Matters

Rev Dr Jione Havea

At Christmas every year, Christians celebrate an event that took place at Bethlehem, in Palestine, many moons ago. A young woman named Mary (Maria, Maryam) gave birth to a child of God named Jesus (Iesous, Isa). This event is narrated in the Christian Bible and remembered in the Qur'an.

Mary's child is worshipped as the embodiment of God. To use biblical terms, Jesus is evidence that "God is with us" (Immanuel). God is not above or far off, but

very near and very present. For many Christians, the Christmas season marks the very presence of God.

This is not to say that God arrived only when Jesus was born. Nor that God is present only in the legacy of the resurrected Christ. Christmas is a celebration of the presence, rather than the arrival, of God.



### **Bethlehem matters to Te Hāhi Weteriana o Aotearoa**

Fast-forward to November 2023: at the Conference of Te Hāhi Weteriana, a message was received from Rev Dr. Mitri Raheb of Bethlehem – the birthplace of Jesus. Raheb's message called for solidarity with Palestinians, in response to Israel's war against Hamas, which is killing many Palestinians in Gaza.

The 2023 Conference responded to Raheb's call with a statement of solidarity and commitments - the statement has been included in this edition of Touchstone, titled MCNZ Statement on Gaza Israeli situation. Upon receiving the statement through Te Aroha Rountree, Raheb replied by email: "The statement was widely circulated and our people felt that there are friends and churches who care."

In the spirit of Raheb's response, we may add that Christmas is also a reminder that God cares. And our challenge as regular members of Te Hāhi Weteriana is simple, do we also care?

### **Bethlehem should matter in Tonga.**

Many members of Te Hāhi Weteriana/Uēsiliana are linked to my homeland, Tonga, and they may be wondering if/how Bethlehem matters when Tonga's government voted against (with 13 other nations) a proposal at the UN to demand a ceasefire at the Israel-Hamas war.

I grew up in Tonga, and one of the confirmation questions in the Tongan Uēsiliana tradition asks, 'Oku 'i fē 'a e 'Otua (Where is God?). The response that we were taught to give is, 'Oku 'i he potu kotoa pē (At all places) – God is present everywhere.

I grew up to understand that Jesus is a special revelation of God, but that God is not limited to one body or event, nor to one time and one place. I later learned that God was present before the birth of Jesus, and that God is present even after the death of Jesus. Christmas is a time to celebrate the historical and ongoing presence of God, a presence that is difficult to imagine in places like Gaza and Ukraine.

God is present everywhere, including at deathbeds. John Wesley is remembered to have uttered these words at his deathbed: "Best of all, God is with us." These words are reminders of the Bethlehem event, and of a prophetic tradition prior to that event, but those words are difficult to make sense in Gaza today.

Wesley's dying words are critical of the vote by Tonga's government at the UN, even if our leaders did not undertake the Uēsiliana confirmation process.

How might we celebrate Christmas this year? I invite your consideration of these invitations:

First, may Christmas 2023 remind us of God's care, and urge us to channel that care to others beyond the confines of the communities that we count among "us." God is with and for more than just us.

Second, may Christmas 2023 be a time for us to celebrate that God is with others, in Bethlehem as well as in Gaza, among mothers of living, injured, and dead children – young and older, and their whānau.

Third, may Christmas 2023 be an opportunity for us to reflect on whether, or not, and how, Bethlehem matters – differently – for us and for others.

Fourth, may Christmas 2023 be an occasion to give and receive—new and old—gifts. We do not all have the means to buy new gifts, and we should not be ashamed to give old gifts. After all, Christmas is an old gift that is received anew every year.



MCNZ Statement on Gaza Israeli situation



The Methodist Church of New Zealand  
Te Hāhi Weteriana o Aotearoa

**A First step towards Reconciliation and Peace**

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly” Martin Luther King Jr.

We, the members of the Conference of the Methodist Church of New Zealand-Te Hāhi Weteriana o Aotearoa, call for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza and the release of hostages as a first step towards reconciliation and peace.

We are outraged at the ongoing bloodshed and violence in Gaza and other parts of Palestine perpetuated by the Israeli government and military. We are also outraged by the death and suffering of innocent people in Israel, caused by the terrorist organisation, Hamas. We express our deep solidarity with all who mourn and suffer, and we pray for healing and restoration.

We condemn the bombing of homes, public spaces, and sacred sites, killing thousands of innocent civilians, particularly children and women. We are equally concerned about the destructive impact of the occupation and violence on God’s creation—the land, the water bodies, and the atmosphere.

We contest the narrative that the conflict in the Holy Land is a war between two religious communities. We categorically state that the conflict is the consequence of settler colonialism and the illegal occupation of Palestinian land by the Israeli state, defying international laws and UN resolutions. A just peace in the Holy Land will not be possible without a non-violent transition from settler colonialism to self-determination (tino rangatiratanga) for the Palestinians.

We urge the international communities to create corridors for humanitarian interventions, such interventions must be based on human rights and human dignity. We reject antisemitism and Islamophobia in all its forms and call on Churches and the wider community to build bridges of reconciliation and peace. We commit ourselves to strive together to tear down all walls that colonise people and the planet.

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### Jim's Cartoon

Brendan Boughen

Our regular cartoon that seeks to find the funny side of faith.



### Opportunity Over Obliteration

Rev Andrew Doubleday, Ministry Facilitator UCANZ

One of the lessons from my first year in my role with UCANZ has been the growing awareness that within the partner churches Cooperating Ventures seem to be largely invisible. While partner churches will claim a CV as one of their own, too often there is a failure to properly recognise that each CV involves more than one partner.

My Christian journey started many years ago, completely outside the mainline denominations. Yet, I dabbled in them, becoming somewhat of an ecclesiastical gypsy following a period in what can only be described as a fundamentalist cult. Being drawn into a Methodist church community which loved me for who I was rather than for whether I believed the right things was a revelation. Once I had engaged with the genius of John Wesley, complete with his personal peculiarities, I felt myself having come home.

And now I find myself back in an ecumenical setting. It is as if life has gone full circle.

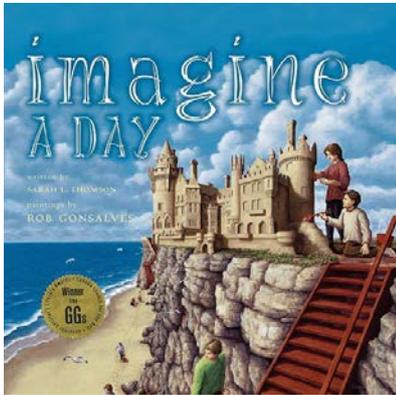
As I have engaged with partner churches, I am left with the clear impression that denominational priorities mean that CVs will remain orphans into the foreseeable future. Each partner has aspects of its life that it holds so sacrosanct that the possibility of willingly engaging in a commitment to promoting ecumenism through holding CVs as a model for the future is becoming a diminishing dream. We are seeing increasing siloisation within the partner churches – each convinced that the priority of their distinctive characteristics is essential for the survival of the Christian Church. Or, at least, their little part of it.

As one looks at the latest Church Life Survey, the reality is that we are all in trouble. And if one imagines that looking at the age demographic biased toward senior citizens is a key indicator of impending death, then the congregations within UCANZ are the most vulnerable. Yet, my naivete, and my experience with aged congregations, suggests that we can reframe this in terms of opportunity, rather than certain obliteration. The reality is that we are continuing to grow older people – I am becoming one of them. And rather than suggesting that the need for ministry with the aged is less, I would suggest it is just as great – after all, each of us is facing one of life's greatest challenges – the inevitable end of it.

I have had the joy of visiting with many CVs comprising mainly or exclusively older people over the past year. Some are actively engaged in mission – in either reaching younger generations, or in recognising a particular call to reaching people like themselves. And there is an energy I have rarely found in 'pure' denominational congregations.



I am grateful for the generosity I have been extended this year; the support from the Standing Committee and its Co-chairs, the staff in the Anglican Office of the Waiapu Diocese who do the administrative heavy lifting; and the kindness of those I have encountered over the past twelve months. I look forward to 2024 with a clearer eyed sense of the challenges and opportunities ahead.



### Advent – Exercising Our Imagination.

Rev Dr Mary Caygill

One of the books I love looking at in my children's book collection is simply entitled *Imagine a Day*. It is a companion book to one entitled *Imagine a Night*. It is a fascinating foray into the imagination. Illustrated by a Canadian artist the book stretches the limits of visual exploration with its few words and stunningly breathtaking illustrations which encourages both child and adult to look beyond the limits of the everyday world and imagine.

Neuroscientists tell us that our ability to imagine makes it possible for us to entertain what is real and what is not so real, to conjure up images that soothe or images that induce fear and anxiety. Through technologies like magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) and position emission topography (PET) scans, we can see how the brain comes alive with electrochemical activity during imaginative activity. A network of many millions of neurons with axons, dendrites, and neurotransmitters between synapses, create pathways for information to be processed at great speeds, making imagination and memory possible. These pathways of learning imply that the more we "practice" a mental exercise such as imagination, the more creative our minds become.

The season of Advent which always begins the new year of the Christian calendar is supremely that season which calls us to engage possibly more than in any other of the Christian seasons in the strenuous and crucial task of imagination.

And, at the very beginning of this season it is the prophets who call us forward in imagination, pointing towards the importance of waiting, anticipating, and trusting in a promised future that seems so very far removed from the current circumstances we find ourselves in locally and globally. In Advent, we live in the unsettling tension between what is and what will be.

The Advent prophets speak out of the frame of a peoples devastated by the invading 'colonial' superpower of the day, Babylon. Once again Jerusalem and the surrounding region has been completely devastated, its inhabitants scattered from their homeland, sent off into exile as spoils of war, to live as a subjugated people in Babylonian captivity. The prophets and those receiving their words know intimately of this tension between what is and what will be.

For those living in exile, their way of life has been completely overturned. Their sense of security has been violated. They have no idea if they will ever live to see their home again. And this leads to deep theological – faith questions: where is God amid this? Why did such devastation happen? Will it ever be possible to return home?

This Advent, I am finding it so very difficult to look beyond the limits of the devastating, all too real images, of the 'spoils of war' embodied in the lives of children in Gaza, Israel, Ukraine, Sudan, and more, in their overwhelming places and experiences of exile. This Advent, like none other, I have little stomach for the crass commercialisation of Christmas in the ever frantic shopping malls, and the overflowing abundance of noise and jollity. If I am to be strenuously disciplined in my active imagining and give credence to God's call for this season, what will be the waiting work required of me to be about the bringing of this promised future. To be as incarnation for this very time.



## Introducing the NZMWF Committee

Lesieli Pope, President NZMWF

The new NZMWF committee have been meeting over the course of this year, planning ways to continuing the purpose of bringing together our women in fellowship. They are excited to live their vision to serve in being life-givers to our church. Given the range of skills within the committee they are looking forward to their

term and excited by the possibilities to grow this ministry and look at strengthening the continuity of NZMWF.

Grow in Christ and be a life-giver. Ka whakamana tatou ia Ihu Karaiti, ka ora te tangata. Tupulekina 'ia Kalaisi 'o hoko koe Fakamo'ui. This is the our vision for National Women's Fellowship 2023-2025.

It is my honour to introduce to you our new NZMWF National Executive Committee. We are excited to share our vision, one that is supported by Luke 10:37 and Philippians 4:19. When we think of women's fellowship, we can think of different ways we see our women within the church and our national committee represents this well. Our committee is a mixture of intergenerational, experience and different examples of ministry.

I come from Papatoetoe Tongan Parish. I am also involved in the ministry as Vice President for Tonga District Women Fellowship and a Lay Preacher. I have a strong interest in women's fellowship and ministry service and have over 20 years' experience as a Social Worker. For the past four years I have been working at the birthing unit of one of New Zealand's biggest hospitals. My goal is to empower women's active involvement in the work of New Zealand Methodist Women's Fellowship.

Rev. Siutaisa Toutai Tukutau is our NZMWF National Chaplain. She serves as the presbyter at Vaine Mo'onia Tongan Methodist Church in Ponsonby. Rev. Siutaisa intends to provide spiritual guidance and offer confidential counselling on religious and moral matters. She emphasises the importance of mutual support and encouragement within the team, aiming to empower women's ministries.

Dr. Soana Muimuiheata is our National Secretary. She is associated with Lotofale'ia Mangere Tongan Methodist Parish, where she holds positions such as Parish Secretary, Secretary for Lotofale'ia Akoteu Board, and Vice-Chair of the Health Committee for Lotofale'ia. She works as a Dietitian Consultant and holds roles in wider civil society governance

Tokanga Filiai is our National Treasurer. She is affiliated with Panmure Methodist Church. She holds the role of Preacher and finds inspiration in the quote by Reinhold Niebuhr about having the wisdom to discern what can and cannot be changed. Professionally she works in finance.

Ofa Matakaiongo is our National Liaison Link and an active member of Onehunga Tongan Methodist Church. Her roles include Assistant Secretary, Treasurer for the church and the Women's committee, Youth Leader, Sunday school teacher, and Inspector for the Vahefonua Tonga Sunday school committee. Ofa works as a banker specialising in Credit Solutions.

'Iunisi Vaitohi is our National Representative for the National Council of Women. She is associated with Dominion/Kingsland Tongan Methodist and holds positions as a Lay Preacher and Leader of the Women's Fellowship. She has an extensive background as a Legal Secretary, with over 30 years of experience in intellectual property rights. She currently works for the Public Defence Service.



## NZMWF

Selina Lavaka Manukia is our National Diaconate Link. She attends Pulela'a New Lynn Methodist Church. Selina works as a Diabetes Liaison nurse. In her church activities, Selina is a Sunday school teacher, involved in home groups and serves as a Youth Leader alongside her husband.

Saloni Manase is our National Uniting Congregation Link. She is associated with Saione Parish in Papatoetoe and holds the position of Parish Treasurer. Her ambition centres around contributing her skills and strengths to the upliftment of Fafine 'ae Metotisi Nu'u Sila (Tongan Methodist Women's Fellowship in New Zealand) and the broader Tongan community.

Melevea Tupou is an active member at Otara Tongan Parish. Her identity centres around being a servant of Christ. Her professional role is that of a Healthcare Assistant and Caregiver. Her goals within the NZMWF include sharing the insights she's gained with her local women's fellowship and collaborating with her fellow committee members to fulfil their calling.

Simulata Pope is our National World Federation Link and Vice President. She is driven by a deep appreciation for Methodist values related to addressing social injustice. Simulata is a children's rights advocate within the public sector based in Wellington to which she is dedicated to championing the rights of children and young people within government spaces.



## CWS APPEAL



### Share Food this Christmas

Christian World Service

"He has filled the hungry with good things." Luke 1:53a

Christian World Service is inviting people to remember God's promise to people who do not have enough food in this year's Christmas Appeal.

Central to the Christmas Appeal is the story of Somawathie, a small-scale farmer who has to contend with wild elephants. The elephants have knocked down her home and destroyed her crops many times. As temperatures warm and climate change begins to bite, she is worried about the future and how she and the elephants will survive. Support for this year's Christmas Appeal will help families meet these challenges.

The last few years have pushed more people into poverty. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) [estimates](#) 122 million

more people experienced hunger last year than in 2019 before the pandemic. Some regions were more affected than others.

In places like Sri Lanka where Somawathie lives, CWS partners are working to improve opportunities for families and prepare for natural disasters. Many teach low cost or regenerative agricultural methods or set up local markets. Others promote education and life skills training for children and young people. What sets them apart is the way they work with communities to tackle the causes of poverty and find new pathways for the future.

Money raised in the annual Christmas Appeal will enable local partner groups to respond to often hard to reach communities in practical ways. In Haiti, rural children will be able to attend school. People who have experienced war firsthand in Gaza and Ukraine can receive psychosocial support. More Tongan families can raise their own chickens to improve their livelihoods after last year's eruption.

Stories, videos and worship material [are](#) available. Please Share Food this Christmas by making a gift through your parish, phoning 0800 74 73 72 or at: [christmasappeal.org.nz](http://christmasappeal.org.nz).



### Husna's Story

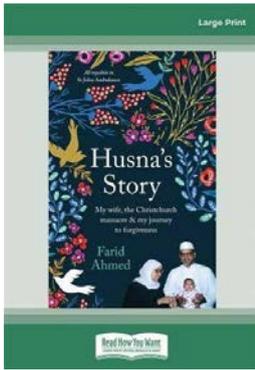
Garth Cant

Husna's Story is, in the words of the subtitle, Farid's account of "My wife, the Christchurch massacre and my journey of forgiveness". It is a book of profound importance for Christians and Muslims, for people of faith and of no faith, for New Zealanders and for the global community.

Author: Farid Ahmed

Publisher: Allen & Unwin, 2020, 320 pages.

Reviewer: Garth Cant



The book contains talanoa, stories of journeys and arrivals, calm, measured accounts of life-destroying events, the story of a courtship and a marriage, and crisp, clear, theology. Most of all, it is Farid's affirmation and a celebration of Husna's life, and the lesson that she taught him. It is a lesson of deep personal importance for Farid and a lesson for all humanity.

Two events are linked: one on a Monday in 1998, and one on a Friday in 2019.

On a Monday in 1998, Farid, waiting on a pedestrian-safe place, was taken out by a drunken driver. There was emergency surgery in Nelson, air-evacuation to Christchurch, more surgeries, and months of wheelchair rehabilitation in Burwood Hospital. Husna was with him every day, praying for him and praying with him. She taught him a life-changing lesson, the lesson of forgiveness. The drunken driver was totally wrong but anger and non-forgiveness were counter-productive.

On Friday 15 March 2019 Farid and Husna were a little late for prayers in Al Noor Mosque. Farid went into the overflow room and Husna joined the women and children. When the gunman arrived and began shooting, Husna helped the women and children out the side door to safety. She went back to look for Farid among the killed and wounded. The gunman was still there and Husna was shot and killed.

Their teenage daughter, Shifa, and Farid, like so many members of the mosque community, were devastated by the shooting. But Husna's lesson on forgiveness had taken root. There was national solidarity in the Hagley Park memorial event where Jacinda Ardern, Iman Gamal, Farid

Ahmed and Leanne Dalziel stood together. The Christchurch message was shared with the world: "We are one."

Different parts of the book will trigger very different emotions with readers. For those who want to know what happened within Al Noor Mosque on that Friday, Part III tells it in measured words. You can read them, or go directly to Part IV. Both are good choices.



### Touchstone Contact Details

I welcome feedback on content included in Touchstone.

Ngā mihi nui

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