

CONFERENCE SUMMARY 2008 – TE HAAHI WETERIANA O AOTEAROA

The conference weekend saw welcome, celebration, induction, farewell, ordination and reception hosted by Auckland's Wesley College. The Powhiri included tributes to those who have died in the past year followed by the induction of the Methodist Church's new General Secretary, Rev David Bush. The new president, outgoing General Secretary Rev Jill van de Geer, and new vice-president Mr Ron Gibson, were also inducted and addressed the Conference on the theme of "Passion & Compassion". The principal of Trinity Theological College was farewelled, as were three retiring presbyters and a retiring deacon. Five new presbyters were ordained and brought into full connexion, along with three presbyters from other denominations. Throughout the services which encompassed these events, and an evening concert, was a diverse range of singing and music representing the languages, cultures and gospel expression of all those in Aotearoa who call themselves Methodist.

Devotions at beginning and end of each weekday conference day,(held at The New Life Centre in Mangere,) focussed upon "living". Colin Gibson, internationally recognised songwriter and musician, led morning devotions asking the question "Are We Yet Alive?" and enlivening the concept of Christians and the Church as "Living Stones" reinforced by a song he wrote on that subject. Staff and students of Wesley College furthered this devotion focus weekday evenings through readings and song. Conference affirmed with acclamation the liveliness and fine example of Wesley College's students and staff.

Official Representatives from The Free Wesleyan Church of Tongan, The Uniting Church of Australia, The Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa NZ, The Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Church and the Congregational Union of NZ attended Conference.

Interest Groups attended by Members of Conference over Conference weekend were: Contemporary Visual Resources for Worship; Maori Spirituality; Music Therapy; Responsible Investment; Studying the Bible in the New Zealand Context; Understanding the Symbolism in Polynesian Dancing, Using Technology for Worship; Violence within Pacific Families. **Business Groups were:** Board of Administration; Board of Ministry; Communications and Organisations; Council of Conference; Faith and Order; Mission and Ecumenical; Social Services/WesleyCom.

The President-Elect from Conference 2008 is Rev Alan Upson. Alan is currently Presbyter at New Plymouth Methodist Church, and Superintendent of seven other congregations, Chairman of the Grey Trust and board member of the Tainui Village Board. Ms Lana Lazarus was chosen as Vice-President Elect. Lana is the first woman lay member of Te Taha Maori to be part of the presidency team.

A new model for Presidency of Te Haahi has been proposed. This model would see Presidents holding position for two years instead of the current one year. The role of vice-president would be replaced by the President-Elect, and the Ex-President would continue to play a significant role for two years after the Presidency. The Presidency would become a full-time paid position. Conference would meet every two years. Initial reactions from Conference were mixed. The proposals have been referred back for further consideration during 2009.

Tauwi is unable to accept a gay or lesbian person as President or Vice-President at this time because there is no consensus in Tauwi. This is the response of Tauwi Strategy following a year of consultation, discussion and prayer. Te Taha Maori had asked the question if a gay or lesbian person could be accepted. Conference reaffirmed its commitment to the decision of Conference 1993 to work within the intentions of the Human Rights Act, the emphasis of John Wesley in his sermon on the Catholic Spirit; the church's contemporary understanding of the rights and privileges of lay and ordained; and the traditional

understanding of the role and function of the president and Memorandum of Understanding (2004). Tauwi also committed to continuing to converse and consult about Te Taha Maori's question and report to Te Taha Maori through the year.

A Task Group will use the report prepared by a commissioner over the past year, on governance and management, to bring further recommendations to Conference 2009. Some of the areas covered by the report are ministry education, mission resourcing, and structure of boards and management. The Task Group will draw on other information and reports. Meanwhile The Board of Ministry was disestablished, creating the way for separate Trinity Theological College and Mission Resourcing Boards to be established. The Conference has appointed Rev Dr David Bell as Trinity's new Principal.

Te Taha Maori will bring a candidate for ordination in 2009, for the first time in more than 30 years. Te Taha Maori noted a symbol of positive partnership with Tauwi was the naming of Minita-a-Iwi on the stationing sheet this year, alongside Presbyters and Deacons.

The Diaconate Task Group believes God is calling the Church to be diaconal: a community centred, inclusive church community, focussed on transformation, visioning and servanthood with servant leaders. The task group seeks to revitalise the diaconate in the Methodist Church of NZ, as it observed at an international conference is happening in churches throughout the world.

Local Shared Ministry has held its third "Methodist Enable" gathering. The vision, skills, and possibilities of Local Shared Ministry in Te Haahi are growing. Further information is found at: <http://methodistenable.blogspot.com>

The Methodist Church of New Zealand has wholeheartedly supported a new covenant with The Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. In this covenant the two churches recognise the many things we have in common and some of our differences. It commits them to ongoing dialogue; continuing to share in worship, fellowship, mission, and eucharist; and celebration together of the offerings of John & Charles Wesley.

Conference endorsed a letter from Muslim leaders, seeking to affirm common ground with Christians, as a basis for peace. Love of God and love of neighbour were cited as the primary key in shared understanding. The letter may be viewed on the website: www.acommonword.com

A National Ecumenical Dialogue involving the Methodists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, Christian Churches of NZ (formerly Churches of Christ), Society of Friends, Baptists, Salvation Army has agreed to develop a shared theological basis, has carried out an exercise to look at where ecumenism was already actively working in NZ, and has committed to continuing to meet and talk regularly.

Ecological concerns were recognised by Conference with all areas of the church be encouraged to carry out an energy audit. An energy audit can be found at <http://www.christian-ecology.org.uk/env-audit.pdf>. The link is also in the Links section on the Methodist website. The church was reminded care of Creation is part of its mission statement, and told of "Walk for the Planet", an ecumenical and community project, initiated by South Island Methodists.

The Methodist Church is the first New Zealand religious organisation to be fully admitted into membership of the Responsible Investment Association of Australasia. This is to help the Methodist Trust Association make wise and ethical investments based on responsible environmental, social and governance values. The association acknowledges the current economic climate will cause considerable

upheaval, but it is confident it will maintain stability and security. The Superannuation Fund for clergy will close off to new members from 2010, after it was decided alternatives, such as Kiwisaver, were viable options.

Lay Superintendency of Synods has been agreed to, in principle, by the Conference. Previously only presbyters can be superintendents of Synods. Law Revision and the Faith and Order Committee have been asked to bring recommendations for its implementation back to Conference 2009.

Three Synods have come together to form the Lower North Island Synod. The unification of Taranaki-Wanganui, Hawkes Bay-Manuwatu and Wellington aims to streamline administration and free up parishes to focus on with mission.

Te Haahi Weteriana O Aotearoa has established a new Public Questions Network. This follows the demise of CASI last year and Conference 2007's clear indication that Methodism is committed to social issues and social justice. A convenor will be appointed to research, communicate, and network including supplying information to the Church and making submissions to Parliament on the Church's behalf. A Notice of Motion asking that Conference invite the New Zealand Government to provide a source of community funding which is not based on lotteries or other forms of gambling is the first item referred to the Public Questions Network.

The Methodist Missions shared exciting stories about their work promoting hope with disadvantaged people. Dunedin's "The Methodist Mission" (formerly Methodist Connect) has decided not to accept further funding from gaming machines. MWF has affirmed this stand with a contribution to the Mission and challenges other churches to also reject gambling funding. The Mission is developing, with Wesley congregation, a combined community centre and early childhood education centre in South Dunedin, the most impoverished urban area in the country. Wellington's "Community Action" told of the challenging and successful bringing together of a group of elderly men from one of the mission's retirement homes with a group of gang youth for a fishing trip on Wellington Harbour. Each group had something to teach the other. "Lifewise", (formerly Methodist Mission Northern) is supporting and encouraging a Kiwi team of soccer players - made up of homeless clients of Lifewise - to train and travel to the Homeless World Cup. Lifewise has sold its iconic buildings in Auckland due to their age, increasing maintenance costs and debt. The Aotea Chapel will continue in the current property for another two years. Methodist City Action (Hamilton Methodist Social Services) are working with the city's nightshelter trust to build and operate a day centre/night shelter for homeless and transient men in that city.

Methodist Women's Fellowship reported on the trip 107 members made to Tonga for the South Pacific Area Seminar of the World Federation of Methodist and Uniting Church Women. MWF and the Association of Presbyterian Women have a special project for the next year aiding the Hearing Association's Communication Project. 400,000 Kiwis have hearing loss. MWF gave Conference a blessing from "*A World of Blessings*":

Go as far as you dare,
For you cannot go beyond the reach of God
Give as extravagantly as you like,
For you cannot spend all the riches of God
Care as lavishly as you are able,
For you cannot exhaust the love of God
Keep journeying as a servant,
For God will always be with you.

Vahefonua Tonga is working towards establishing a national Methodist Mission as the numbers and needs of Tongan people in Aotearoa increases. Vahefonua is engaging in a wide process of consultation with Methodist church bodies and beyond to create a mission which will improve quality of life, prosperity, education and skills.

Talanoa Oceania '08, which focuses on learning and research in Pacific Islands cultures and its people in New Zealand and Australia was attended by several people at Conference. This was held in Australia but Talanoa Oceania '09 will be held in Auckland from 10 – 12 July.

HIV AIDS affects all people the Methodist Church has been told. A resource pack from Mission and Ecumenical has been given to all parishes. Women's Fellowship also have study material available.

The Evangelical Network and the Liberal Society shared a dinner together during the Conference weekend.

The gay and lesbian members of Conference invited all people to attend a Communion Service, offered as hospitality, during a weekday lunchtime. About a third of those at Conference attended.

The Evangelical Network is organising and promoting "Equipt; Connecting Communities with Christ". The whole church is encouraged to attend this conference at Ngaruawahia in April-May next year. Several prominent international Methodist leaders will be speaking 28 April – 1 May.

Methodist Youth reported on their conference "Where is God for Young People?" One of their conclusions was that God is in the going and coming, God is in the doing, and God is as much a verb as a noun. The youth asked the Church to intentionally encourage, celebrate and help develop the talents and gifts of their young people without exploitation.

One of Methodism's acclaimed academics and pastors, Rev Dr James Stuart of Christchurch, launched his book "The John Wesley Code; Finding a Faith that Matters". James, best known as Jim, said he tried to present the enduring themes and principles of Wesley in a compact and accessible way, so that we may not only learn the history but be inspired and renewed in our lives today.

A significant quote which was consistently raised during Conference: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has." *Margaret Mead.*

Parish reviews focusing on ascertaining and planning for mission and ministry will be conducted every three years under a proposal brought by **Mission Resourcing**. Police vetting will no be a requirement for presbyters, deacons, lay ministers, and lay workers paid by parishes to work with children, youth and the elderly. Mission Resourcing staff are using their blog for communication and discussion with the church and other people in ministry – <http://missionresourcingcentre.blogspot.com>.

Conference engaged in significant debate about a stipend increment for additional responsibility. As there was no consensus, the resolutions were referred back for further work during 2009. Conference has had housing allowances on its agenda for many years. Conference approved rental payment to those living in their own home. The Board of Administration is charged with implementing this new policy.