



The Methodist Church of New Zealand Te Hāhi Weteriana o Aotearoa

Administration Division

METHODISM – 20/20 AND BEYOND

Have you seen the TV adverts where a crowd of people see details of an optometrist and rush off to enjoy the special deal?

If only there was a means to provide perfect 20/20 vision for the way ahead for the Church.

Well.....maybe there is. It is not as simple as getting prescription lenses, rather it requires effort, energy and imagination. It will involve risk, change, losses and gains and will be more possible when we all participate.

In March Council of Conference appointed a small work group as a response to expressed concerns about the strength and viability of Parishes, and the way the Church is structured.

The work group of Tevita Finau, Arapera Ngaha, Rachael Masterton, Sharon Tito, Trevor Hoggard and David Bush addressed four questions:

1. Why does the Church need to change, and why now?

While the initial issue addressed at Council of Conference was a significant shortfall in funding for the Connexional Budget, this was seen to be a symptom rather than a cause.

Many, if not most English speaking and some Pacifica congregations are smaller and older with fewer people and resources available.

The complexity and cost of compliance has increased significantly.

We are not reproducing ourselves. It is hard to attract and keep new members.

All too often buildings and our physical plant take our energy and resources. Delayed maintenance and seismic strength issues affect too many congregations.

If that is the challenge, there is good news that there are thousands of Methodists all across the country who are investing themselves to make their Churches and communities life enhancing.

It is our belief that Church members do not wish to quietly close down, but rather are seeking direction and insight which can lead to renewal, health and vigour.

We need to make changes now because we still have people committed to the gospel and the mission of the Church in the world.

2. What is the full extent of the change?

The Church is not alone as an institution facing challenge in the 21st Century. All sorts of clubs and societies are having to rethink the way they relate to the world around them and engage with interested people.

In the past the need for significant renewal has been recognised, but has seldom taken place because most of us already in the Church are happy with the way things are.

Even though we see structures which are wearing people out, and recognise difficulty of engaging with a community which is increasingly secular and suspicious of the Church we find it hard to incorporate new ways of reaching into our communities.

Unfortunately more of the same will likely continue to get mixed results and continuing decline.

There are reminders in our current context of the world in which Methodism first emerged. Churches, and not just Methodist Churches, struggling to relate to and be relevant to the quest for meaning and purpose in our wider society. The message proclaimed in our pulpits does not make its way into the 'inbox' of the average person. Rather than random change we are suggesting that our heritage and experience as Methodists over 275 years can provide pointers for the way ahead.

Even so, it will not necessarily be easy or comfortable to change from what we have grown used to.

The Vision

Methodism began as a renewal movement. Wesley preached in the open to the places where people were gathered. It was small groups on the fringe of the Church who were enabled to explore what it meant to take their faith seriously. This was enhanced by lively music and challenging preaching.

Wesley established three types of gathering:

1. Class Meetings

These were compulsory for those who were seeking to know more of the Christian faith. They were for men and women. These were the place where the basics of the Christian faith were taught and where new converts were encouraged in their faith. Those who responded to Wesley's preaching were placed in these groups to help them grow.

2. Bands

These were smaller single sex groups where people "*really got down to business*" of what it meant to be a disciple. Places where people could test their faith and refine their calling. Today we would probably see these as leadership development classes.

3. Societies

A voluntary organisation which sat alongside the Anglican Parish Church. They preserve the idea that Methodism is an association of the like-minded for an activist role, to make a difference. Societies were permeable, members could come in and out.

Methodism was built on the principle of helping small groups of individuals grow in holiness to change the world.

If Methodism is really a renewal movement is it time to set that as our vision and promote contemporary structures to enable that to happen in 20/20 and beyond.

3. What might this look like?

Societies 20/20

Imagine a "Methodist Society" where people of any Church, or none, could belong.

The Society would have the freedom to follow specific interests.

The structure would be permission giving.

Linked (online).

Resourced by website.

Societies could be short-term or long-term. In the internet age could easily be 'virtual' gathering of like-minded people.

Classes and Bands

Building trust and relationships. Being encouraged, uplifted and challenged. We live in a time when mediocre is not enough.

4. But what of the existing Church?

Methodist congregations are part of a Connexion. This word with its unique Methodist spelling reminds that Methodists are connected. Originally it was in connexion or connected to Mr Wesley. Today it is in connexion with the Conference and one another.

The Parishes and congregations of the Methodist Church are the basis for existing mission and will help provide the supportive environment for new and renewed expressions.

Being in Connexion, being connected means moving beyond congregationalism and discovering the power of working together.

The vision is for sustainable communities of Methodist people. For this to be the continuing reality Methodist and Co-operative and Union Parishes will need to work together in new ways.

To move from silo's to connected communities.

We see several Parishes working together as one administrative unit. This could include Pacifica and Palangi Parishes or Parishes over a larger geographical area.

Not only does this reduce the costs of compliance, it provides the opportunity to share gifts and enhance the whole.

Older Methodists will recognise the similarity to circuits. Is this a name and concept we could use again or do we need something new?

These connected communities have the capacity to simplify stationing, having full-time rather than part-time appointments.

Once established the workload of Synod Superintendents would be reduced as they have fewer individual Parishes to work with.

Connected communities are more likely to have additional capacity for outward facing mission.

The work group would like to see the Methodist Church formally adopt the "circuit model" to be implemented over the next five years.

Summary

Council of Conference appointed a work group when faced with a \$250,000 Connexional Budget deficit. It was agreed that this could be funded initially from the PAC Distribution, but a deficit of this size this was not sustainable for the medium or long term.

The work group is saying the way ahead is not a matter of drawing red lines through existing budgets, but rather discerning the shape of Methodism in New Zealand in the years to come. Structure for the future needs to arise from our mission.

The report suggests two broad areas of significant change:

1. A renewal of “society” and “class” where those who are new to Christian faith can explore and potentially become disciples. A flexible space resourced through the internet.
2. A simplification of the existing Church. It is not fair when small faithful worshipping communities spend all their energy on compliance. Connected communities are proposed as a way to make Methodism sustainable.

This is quite a broad-brush report. There is plenty of detail that needs to be added. The detail is a bit like the frames which hold the lenses of spectacles in place. Before the frames are added we want to see if the prescription is heading in the right direction.

What might you alter, add or suggest to help get 20/20 vision?