



PRESIDENTIAL TEAM ADDRESS

**Methodist Conference
Saturday 15 November 2014**

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Vice-President: Dr Arapera (Bella) Ngaha**

Methodist Conference 2014

Hamilton

Te Hāhi Weteriana O Aotearoa

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*Claudelands, Conference & Exhibition Centre, Hamilton
Saturday 15 November 2014*

Greetings

Le paia e, o le fa'apotopotoga ma le sauniga i lenei aso, o le a le o'o se fa'amatalaga ma se leo o le auauna i outou pa'ia sau'o ma outou mamalu le popo. O tapu ma pa'ia fa'ale atunu'u, o tapu fo'i ma outou pa'ia fa'ale-Talalelei, o le a nu'unu'u atu.

Ae tau ia na ona fa'aleo se fa'afetai fa'alea'ua'u, i lau afioga i le ..., lau susuga..., le Sinoti Samoa i ona tulaga fa'alupea, o matagaluega ma aulotu na o ma galulue ai, i o ma aiga, o uo ma e masani ua fa'amalo'ulo'u ma afifio mai e molimauina ma lagolagoina lenei fa'amoemoe pei ona tatou iai i lenei aso. O se upu ma se fa'amatalaga e sufi ai lagona o le auauna e fa'apea atu ai: Fa'afetai! Fa'afetai tele lava le afifio ma le tala mai o 'a'ao. *(An acknowledgement of the gathering, the sacredness of the place, and appreciation of the support from all.)*

E tautoko kaha ana au ki ngā mihi kua mihi i tō tātou nei powhiri i te ata nei. Ki a rātou kua wheturangitia, haere mai haere, haere ake rā koutou kia noho marie tonu i raro i ngā parirau atawhai o Te Ariki. E moe, e moe, oti atu!

Ka tika me mihi atu ki a Kīngi Tūheitia, me tana whānau me te Kāhui Ariki puta noa. E tuku mihi aroha atu ki a koutou e te iwi o Tainui, āe, ko tēnei te tau kotahi rau rima tekau ki muri o te patunga o ō koutou iwi, te turakina o ō rātou kāinga hoki. E tika ana me maumahara tonu mātou!

Ko Puhanga Tohora tōku maunga, ko Mangatawa rāo ko Otaua ōku awa nō roto te riu o Hokianga hakapau karakia. Ka tuku

mihi aroha ki ōku tupuna, ki tōku whānau hoki, nā rātou i whakatō te kakano i roto i a au kia mau ai tēnei korowai o te hāhi. Nā reira taku mihi aroha ki a koutou, e kore e mutu ngā mihi.

Bicentenary Year

The year 2014 is significant in the history of Christianity in Aotearoa/New Zealand. It marks the milestone of two hundred years since the very first seed of the gospel was sown in the soil of Aotearoa, when Reverend Samuel Marsden preached the first Christian Service at Oihi in the Bay of Islands, on Christmas Day 1814. However, we also acknowledge that the Māori people who first inhabited this land have always had their own spiritual beliefs, practices and understandings about the world and its divine origins.

So as we gather here at our Annual Methodist Conference of 2014, we join with the Christian community in New Zealand, celebrating and giving thanks for the God-given vision of the gospel sown and grown in Aotearoa since 1814. We acknowledge those Pākehā missionaries and Māori leaders who mapped out steps to achieve that vision of spreading the gospel 'te rongopai' o Ihu Karaiti throughout this land.

These early Christians were the people who motivated, inspired, encouraged, equipped and empowered many for their mission, being assured by John Wesley's words "The best of all is, God is with us."

We pause for a moment to offer our praise to God.

I will give thanks to Thee
O Lord among the people
I will sing praises to Thee
among the nations

For Thy steadfast love is great
It is great to the heavens
And Thy faithfulness
Thy faithfulness to the clouds

Be exalted, O God, above the heavens
Let Thy glory be over all the earth
Be exalted, O God, above the heavens
Let Thy glory be over all the earth

To God be the Glory
To God be the Glory
To God be the Glory

For the things he has done
Through his blood he has saved me
Through his power he has raised me
To God be the Glory
For the things he has done

As we celebrate and commemorate this significant moment in history, we recognise that we have reached a milestone. But achieving a milestone also signals the start of a new journey that takes us on to the next milestone.

Challenges

This Bicentenary year brings challenges for the whole Christian community, including the churches, religious organisations and our own Methodist Church. We have celebrated and acknowledged many accomplishments as a church of Mission in these last 200 years. But we face major challenges in terms of sustainability and our relevance in today's society, and indeed our survival into the next century and beyond.

The University of Otago, Department of Theology and Religious Studies' Report entitled: "Towards 2015: the future of mainline

Protestantism in New Zealand” states that the population involved in the Christian church has been declining considerably since the mid-1960s. From 1960 to the year 2000 the declining trend shows attendance at weekly services is down 10%. Professor Lineham’s analysis of the 2013 census data concurs with that decline and he notes that the Methodist Church has lost 19,302 members over the last seven years, or an average of 2,757 people or 2.36% per year.

These statistics are not new to most of us. We see the decline reflected in the parish pews every Sunday. We are also painfully aware of many of the reasons for this decline. The changes in our society that impact upon our people and their lifestyles include advances in technology, and the shift to a more individualistic and economy focussed community that takes away from activities such as communal worship. How one chooses to spend the limited weekend time available to us means that we must consider how we “do church” to keep us relevant for our congregations. Our congregations are shrinking and if we continue to follow the trend signalled by Professor Lineham, we may not survive the next 50 years as a viable institution.

Time to Hope, to Dream and to Vision

The question is: what are we doing about this? What are our Hopes and Dreams for the Methodist Church –Te Hāhi Weteriana, for the next fifty years? Do we have a clear vision of where we’re going? What considerations have we made towards finding strategies and/or policies for Growth in Synods, Parishes, congregations and/or fellowships?

We believe that it is time for our church to seriously re-assess and re-evaluate where we are at. It is time to have a good look at ourselves and see where our main focus, our emphasis, our priorities are, and set clear goals and a vision of where we

would like to be in the next fifty years. The future of Methodism in Aotearoa New Zealand is in your hands and mine.

There is an old saying: *if you fail to plan, you plan to fail*. This is true in the world of business and is also true in church organizations.

The Mission Resourcing Report to Conference last year highlighted the question around whether the church has any policy for growth, or not. The response to the question was “there are many policies for growth already put in place in various regions.” Some parts of the church have clear goals and strategies to ensure growth; we must make sure these plans also extend outwards into the local community, encouraging and bringing in new people. We need a co-ordinated Connexional approach to this matter.

Our church is gifted in many ways. We are multiracial, multicultural, multilingual, multi-ethnic with great wealth in all levels of theological perspectives and Biblical knowledge and understanding. Most of all we are proud of our Bi-Cultural Journey, based on the covenant between Tangata Whenua and Taiwi to which the whole church committed itself by the resolution of the 1983 Conference. The bicultural journey is not merely a touchstone for the ministry and mission of Te Hāhi Weteriana, but it is the cornerstone, the ‘mauri’ stone that guides and sustains us as one body with many parts - a multicultural community of Christian faith here in Aotearoa.

We believe there is no need to go elsewhere to find ways and ideas for growth. We’ve got it. But, it’s a matter of making the commitment to be brave, to have the passion, aspirations, ambition and the willingness to sow and grow.

In all organisations there is a tendency for the leadership to become complacent when things are going well and there can arise reluctance to change the status quo. Let us not be

complacent, let us plan for change that will help make our church grow, thrive and flourish.

I had the privilege of accompanying the outgoing President Rex Nathan attending the National Church Leaders' Aotearoa New Zealand meeting in Wellington during the last week of September this year. Each of the church leaders shared a report of something significant or critical issues facing their church to date. The Archbishop of the Anglican Church The Most Reverend Phillip Richardson and the outgoing Moderator of the Presbyterian Church, The Right Reverend Ray Coster both noted that their churches have seen signs of growth, particularly in the Tikanga Pākehā of the Anglican Church, and the English speaking ministries for the Presbyterian and mainly in their youth, their young people. These changes are taking place because of particular strategies being put in place over the last two years, training and planning for growth and succession. Perhaps the appointment of our own Tauwiwi Children, Young People & Families Ministry National Co-ordinator is one step towards our vision for growing our church.

Church growth is not about competing with the ministry down the street or with other denominations, but more about how the people God has planted in the local, regional and national church are disciplined and used by God with their unique gifts.

We believe people are called to churches for a special purpose, and that is to sow and spread the gospel. We are all on the same journey and the church helps us develop as Christians and supports our unique calling.

Rick Warren in his book *Purpose Driven Church* says “since the church is a living organism, it is natural for it to grow if it is healthy...If a church is not growing it is dying.

Time for Life-Transformation to Grow

In order to grow, changes or life transformation must take place. The reading from Ecclesiastes reminds us there is a time for all things and that requires change. Transformation of life occurs all around us, in the seasons, in activities and events and also in the hearts and minds of people. The life-transforming power of the Holy Spirit, the life-transforming grace of Christ Jesus and the life-transforming love of God are evident in all that we aspire to do and be.

Change can sometimes be difficult it means that things will not be the same. It may take us out of our comfort zone, but it is necessary. Change may also signal progress. We live in a world of rapid change, so we need to be deliberate about how and what we sow in order for our church to grow and be relevant for tomorrow.

Jesus has called the church to look and move forward - to progress. Our greatest task as Christians and as a church is to lead people to find that life-transforming experience that brings them into the Family of Christ! We are not meant to fear change, but rather we are meant to take risks, embrace it, and even help to create it!

Bicultural Journey

This church took risks 30 years ago and embarked upon a life-transforming engagement that set in place our own Bicultural Journey.

In 1981 our church deliberately set out to explore just how a more 'just' Methodist Church in this land might operate. This signalled a major change in how we engaged with each other, how we managed the business of this church, our finances and 'being Methodist in Aotearoa'. It was time for issues of 'Power' and 'Control' in our church to be addressed.

We began with the ten plus ten 'Power Sharing' Hui at Whakatuora Māori Methodist Centre. Ten of the most senior members of the Connexion, all Pākehā, met with ten Māori Division members and faced together the concerns of injustice and inequity for Māori in this our own homeland and how this related to our church life.

The next two years saw the whole church explore what this might mean in real life terms, what it might look like in practice, who and what would change and at what levels. Was this change for someone else, just the Connexional Leaders perhaps? Or perhaps this was only for Methodist congregations and didn't apply to us in Co-operating Ventures or Uniting Parishes? Surely, the questions were asked, "that can't mean us because we don't even have any Māori in our Parish?" These questions and many more were addressed and 30 years on they continue to be so.

So let us consider how we measure our growth in this Bicultural Journey? There have been a number of structural changes that has seen the sharing of constructive dialogue and decision making processes giving equitable voice to Te Taha Māori despite their numerically smaller membership. Council of Conference, the 4 plus 4 Connexional Appointments process and consensus decision-making are all examples of structural change that honours this commitment. Māori engagement alongside Tauwiwi is paramount in all aspects of our church life so that we model the vision of our tupuna, of a shared governance, when they signed Te Tiriti in 1840.

And as we have worked in this manner, has it really been enough? We pride ourselves on being able to recite the Lord's Prayer in Māori and sing Mā te Marie to close our services, but how much further have we actually moved? What changes have taken place on the level of the individual? The theme for the Reverend Rua Rakena's Presidential term in 1975 was "don't tell me, show me", who of our presbyters today can say

they are comfortable with conducting funerals, unveilings, or any services in a marae setting? How many can articulate Māori greetings in a manner appropriate to their own local Māori setting? How many have built relationships with the local Māori community, stepped out of their comfort zone to meet with Māori on Māori terms?

It is timely now to look back at the seeds, *ngā kākano i ruia mai* in November 1983 and consider our growth as a church. Numerically we are a church in decline. But theologically and socially we can be proud to measure our growth through our bicultural, multicultural and our ecumenical relationships that have broadened our experiences and enriched our ways of 'being church'.

What is of paramount importance now is the sustainability of our Methodist Church and our distinctive bicultural identity. This church has committed itself to act in a 'just' manner, as the prophet Micah tells us God requires that of us and thus this church acts to reflect the rightful place of Māori in Aotearoa. It is this theological imperative that has guided and continues to do so, our Bicultural Journey. We must ensure, 30 years on, that the stories of our bicultural beginnings, the rationale for undertaking this particular journey, are understood by our next generations and all newcomers to this land and our church.

Trinity College has in recent years introduced the TR301 Course delivered in the context of Waitangi and the early Mission Stations in the north. In this way those training for ministry and those new to the church are challenged to understand the Māori story of Te Tiriti, Māori and Missionary relationships and the beginnings of bicultural relations in this land. This is our church's history that should be understood by everyone in all of our congregations including our expanding cultural Congregations and Synods.

Jesus' Parable of the Mustard seed reminds us of the ability and potential of the smallest seed to be sown or planted, then has grown and become the largest tree in the garden, large enough for birds to nest, and also provides a place for shelter and of security.

Jesus was well aware of the opposition to his teachings from the powers of the day, and the disciples faced even greater odds – Israelites and Jews, Pagan nations, the might of the Roman Empire, the whole world was against them but God was with them, and the power of God in the small can change the world.

Thus, Jesus' disciples, this small band of followers went into the world, they preached the good news, they changed minds, hearts and lives with their message, their work and God's power changed the world.

We are mindful that we are a 'small' church. We are the 4th largest denomination behind the Catholic Church, the Anglican Church and Presbyterians and we are a little more than 20% numerically to those of the Catholic Church.

We should not let ourselves be constrained by this. The World Methodist Communion is one of the largest Protestant Denominations in the world with 81 million people in 155 countries. And it is growing and vibrant in many parts of the world.

Concluding thoughts

History shows us that change is inevitable. Our choice lies in making those changes positive, empowering and sustainable. Our Bicultural Journey continues, and we must learn to be better at travelling that journey. We must also seek to grow our church communities beyond our own safe walls of the Methodist Connexion and reach out into the community.

Growing our church must be our priority, sowing now for tomorrow. Our parishes are facing some difficult times, including decisions about how to 'do church' when their buildings no longer meet seismic regulations and the cost to upgrade them is beyond their means.

It is now that we need to think and work differently, to utilise and share all our resources, to show what it means to be a Connexional Church, and to think beyond today.

Let us also remember that the context of Christianity here must be rooted in the soil of this land. What has worked for Methodists in Britain, in Europe, in the Pacific, and in other parts of the world may not work here in the context of Aotearoa.

What has worked for us in times gone by may not be so for our next generations, and so let us be alert to what will keep us relevant in today's and tomorrow's society here in Aotearoa.

Most of all let us allow the Holy Spirit to continue to empower the Church to grow through witness and ministry, not only in Aotearoa, but also throughout the world. And let us remember that wherever a church is open to the power of the Holy Spirit, it is alive, vibrant and will grow in faith, hope and witness.

The challenge therefore, is for us to be bold, to take the time to find the way forward to further grow our church into tomorrow. Let us be that healthy, robust, committed church that cares about its commitments, its people and the communities in which we live. Let us ensure that we utilise today as a time to sow, a time to grow our church into tomorrow.
