

Supplementary Report (Continuation from page B(ii) 31)

TRANS – CULTURAL ISSUES IN TAIUIWI

Introduction

The Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of Aotearoa – New Zealand held at Wesley College, Paerata 2013 made the following decision.

Taiuiwi Business B(ii) decision 8:

Conference asks the Tumuaki and the Directors of Mission Resourcing to initiate the discussion among synods, Hui Poari and Rohe, on trans-cultural issues in the Connexion, and report to Conference 2014.

The following report, with its two *Suggested Decisions*, represents the attempt by the Tumuaki and Directors of Mission Resourcing to listen to the voices of those Pasifika groups and their English-speaking neighbours which have stood aside from the current Conference decision that Pasifika language congregations must belong to their relevant cultural synod. We have taken note of numerous and varied comments, complaints and suggestions and attempted to clarify and collate that material into one reasoned argument which will present the Conference with an alternative way of organising its Pasifika congregations and synods.

The Directors and Tumuaki hope that we have understood what we have heard and have done an acceptable job in putting that material into a coherent argument with relevant *Suggested Decisions* which reflect the views of those we consulted.

The Conference needs to be aware that to accept the two *Suggested Decisions* contained in this report would entail abandoning the current position that it is mandatory for all Pacific language congregations to belong to their appropriate cultural synod and not to the local English-speaking parish and synod. To adopt such a change, Conference would need to be convinced that a Pacific language congregation could be adequately and appropriately supervised by an English-speaking synod.

This report was initially prepared for Conference 2014, but it was agreed that it be delayed for further reconciliation work to proceed before bringing it before Conference 2015.

Background History

Many years ago Conference passed a Law noted in the Law Book under Section 4:2.2.2 which reads:

Sinoti Samoa, Vahefonua Tonga and Wasewase Ko Viti Kei Rotuma shall have nationwide responsibility for all Samoan, Tongan and Fijian Language parishes and congregations of the Methodist Church of New Zealand Te Haahi Weteriana O Aotearoa under their jurisdiction.

Over the years problems have arisen in parishes and congregations around the interpretation of the Law.

This Law has been interpreted to mean that all congregations of a reasonable size which conduct services of worship and business meetings in a Pacific language *must* belong to the appropriate cultural Synod and not act as members of the local English-speaking Parish and Synod. The intention behind this mandatory ruling was to embolden Pacific congregations to free themselves from the patrimony of the English-speaking Parishes and establish themselves as equal partners at the local level with English-speaking Parishes and to deter English-speaking Parishes from trying to keep Pacific congregations under their wing and thereby, to some degree, under their control.

The Law, therefore, was made in the interest of Pacific people with the intent to establish a Pacific presence within the Methodist Church of New Zealand Te Haahi Weteriana o Aotearoa as equal partners to the long-established English-speaking Parishes.

The Law also provides for appropriate cultural oversight as well as nurturing and equipping Pacific congregations to define their Mission in Aotearoa New Zealand within the MCNZ. Throughout the years of its operation, this Law has delivered what was intended. Pacific congregations have thrived in more and more locations and Pacific people share increasingly in the leadership of the Church at Local, Regional and Connexional levels. In many places, this present Law continues to work effectively and without dispute, but in other places the Law has never been fully implemented because some Pacific congregations wish to make their relationship with the local English-speaking parish their primary relationship and see themselves as a member congregation of the local Parish which belongs to the local English-speaking Synod.

It is in response to the two Memorials to Conference from such Parishes that this conversation was authorised by Conference 2013. The following part of the report seeks to distil what was expressed in several meetings in such Parishes and suggest a possible way forward.

Parishes and Synods Visited

In response to the Commission by Conference 2013, the Tumuaki and the Directors of Mission Resourcing have visited the following Parishes and Synods to investigate the current nature of relationships within Tauwi and especially those parishes where a Pacific language congregation does not wish to have any connection at all with Sinoti Samoa or Vahefonua Tonga Synods or despite having a relationship with a cultural synod, do not wish to establish themselves as an independent parish, but rather remain as a congregation or fellowship within an English-speaking parish. The parishes we have visited are as follows:

1. Palmerston North.
2. St. John's, Hamilton East.
3. Wesley Wellington.
4. Hutt City Uniting Congregations.
5. Waitakere.
6. Waterview
7. Sinoti Samoa.
8. Vahefonua Tonga.

We wish to express our gratitude to the Parishes and Synods who have warmly received us and for being so open and honest in their conversations.

A Summary of the Conversations and Responses

Whilst many see the logic of the Law as it stands, the relationship between Pacific congregations and their English-speaking counterparts has moved on considerably in the years since this Law was put in place intended to establish equality between different cultures within the Church. For many, especially outside Auckland, the primary relationship is between the local congregations of the Parish, rather than with their synod, or any synod. This local bond of friendship and mutual support has grown up over years and is more important than the language used in worship, which is the determining factor under the existing Law in ascribing to which synod a group should belong. What holds the local congregations together is stronger than what keeps them apart. To split a Pacific congregation from an English-speaking congregation into two separate Parishes, each with their own parish council, seems an unnecessary duplication of effort at the local level and demands double the number of office holders as well as feeling contrary to our connexional ethos.

When difficulties arise, the first port of call for many Pacific congregations outside Auckland is their local English-speaking Parish or Presbyter, rather than the more distant Synod leader in Auckland. Sometimes, when Cultural Synods do intervene in the affairs of their Parishes they do so without reference to the local English-speaking parish with whom the Pacific congregation shares so much of its life. It is likely that English-speaking synods relate to their own parishes in a similar fashion, but increasingly the lives of the English language congregations are influenced by the Pacific language-based groups at the local level and cannot easily be treated in isolation from them. Many tense situations might have been avoided if Synods had spoken to each other alongside their respective congregations, rather than too readily leaving it to one Synod alone to intervene at a local level.

The relationship between different cultures is not a one-way street; relationships work to mutual benefit. People say they are trying to take the best from each culture. Both parties are richer for sharing. English-speaking Parishes often find that it is only with Pacific young people they can together maintain a viable group for children and young people's work. On the other hand, Pacific congregations which were visited have suggested that engaging more fully with the English-speaking congregation rather than their own Cultural Synod has enabled them to adapt more fully to life in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Some will worry that such a statement poses the danger that Pacific people will once again fall under the patrimony of Pakeha English-speaking leaders, but this is not how people making that statement view the matter. The statement is made from a perspective where most of us are accustomed to working in multi-cultural settings and cross cultural and language barriers throughout the day. School or work may be English, but home, television and time with one's peers may be another language. Living together in Aotearoa/New Zealand is an increasingly multicultural experience for us all, whatever our ethnic background and cultural gifts pass in all directions across these permeable barriers. Pakeha marries Samoan and raises children of a blended cultural and language outlook; Tongan marries Maori; Korean marries Scottish and so on. Can we assume that people can be placed into rigidly defined cultural groups any longer? Can we accept that people may have a multiplicity of cultural identities that adapt to the circumstances? On the other hand, we do need the Cultural based Synods to continue to re – define and maintain the Pacific Cultural values and language if we are to keep them alive in the total life of Aotearoa – New Zealand.

The days are gone when we can speak of Pakeha as if that is a synonym for English-speaking; Pakeha is the dominant group admittedly, but still only one group of many within the English-speaking part of the Church. Our English-speaking parishes comprise members and presbyters that are increasingly from other than Pakeha background. This means that the argument that English-speaking Parishes cannot offer oversight to a Pacific congregation because they do not understand the language or culture is less and less true; English-speaking Parishes and Synods do have people of these cultures within them on whose expertise they could call as many of them speak more than one language. Should that not be the case, then there is nothing preventing the English-speaking Synod calling upon Sinoti, Waseswase or Vahefonua for their help.

The present interpretation of the existing Law gives no discretion for Pacific groups. If they worship predominantly in a Pacific language, they must belong to their respective cultural synods. However, there are other models around for us to consider. The Presbyterian Church allows its Pacific congregations to choose to belong to a Cultural Presbytery or remain with the local English-speaking Presbytery.

Te Taha Maori deal with their Cultural issues within their own forums as is appropriate.

Our Cultural Synods will have an ongoing role of providing culturally appropriate leadership, appropriate language resources and long term support for Pacific language tuition for New Zealand-born Pacific generations.

However, wishing to maintain the language of one's heritage does not necessarily imply that people have to adopt Pacific (or in future Korean) CULTURE as their prime or only self-identification. Identity is more complex than language alone; therefore, some congregations may speak the same language as their Pacific synod, yet they do not identify any longer with the culture of that synod. Such groups may be ethnically and linguistically Pacific people, but see their culture as having blended with their English-speaking neighbours in the English-speaking parish.

If we are willing to accept that language is just one marker of cultural identity among many, we could allow groups to decide their own identity, taking into account whatever factors they feel appropriate.

Such a proposal reflects the policy in place for candidates for ordained ministry. The Church insists that candidates must be able to demonstrate a fluency in the language in which they wish to

be stationed, but language ability is not the only factor taken into account. Candidates must also demonstrate an understanding of and familiarity with other cultural factors besides language. This example proves the point that the Church already accepts the principle that cultural identity is broader than simply speaking a language.

Thus the *Suggested Decision* on which the Tumuaki and Directors of Mission Resourcing are agreed to put before Conference is as follows:

Suggested decision one:

1. Sinoti Samoa, Vahefonua Tonga and Wasewase ko Viti kei Rotuma shall have nationwide responsibility for all Samoan, Tongan and Fijian language parishes and congregations of the Methodist Church of New Zealand Te Haahi Weteriana o Aotearoa **who choose to come** under their jurisdiction.

Addendum

In the light of feedback from August synods (2014) this following addendum and *Suggested Decision Two* has been made. It cannot be stressed enough that the focus of these conversations has been on a very small number of parishes. This does not mean that the majority voice has been ignored; it simply means that we accept that in the majority of our Pacific congregations the relationship with their cultural synod works well and is of great benefit. This report is intentionally targeted at those relatively few, but persistent situations where relationships have not been good. The report does not intend to malign the work of our cultural synods in any way, but since Conference also has a duty of care to those parishes where things have not run smoothly over a significant number of years now, this report has been commissioned to see if a way can be found to understand the situation of these parishes and make some adjustment to our practices to cater for their needs.

The whole basis of this report rests on the understanding that the issue cannot be simply written off as individuals engaged in power-struggles and crucially on the understanding that language alone is not the sole marker of cultural identity and that people who use the same language do not necessarily share an identical cultural outlook – a fact that the church appears to accept in its procedures for candidating in English-speaking synods.

However, if cultural dissonance is the basis for these difficult relationships, it makes no sense at all if a parish has two separate Pacific congregations using the same building and doing the same things. If activities are duplicated side by side the situation can quickly descend into local rivalries, ill-feeling and utter confusion for the wider community beyond the church. We have heard this concern from the August meetings of our cultural synods and so wish to place before Conference the following additional Suggested Decision:

Suggested decision two:

2. In consultation with the Pacific synods, Conference is asked to put together guidelines in order to avoid duplication of Pacific congregations of the same language and culture within a parish using one set of property.