



PRESIDENTIAL TEAM ADDRESS

**Methodist Conference
Saturday 1 October 2016**

**President: Rev Prince Devanandan
Vice-President: Viv Whimster**

Methodist Conference 2016

Wesley College

Te Hāhi Weteriana O Aotearoa

PRESIDENTIAL TEAM ADDRESS

Methodist Conference 2016

Wesley College, Paerata, Auckland
Saturday 1 October 2016

Moored to Christ, Moving into Mission

Conference is a time to gather as a community before the next stage of our journey together. Over the last two years, our Presidential Team of Tovia and Bella focussed on the theme of sowing and growing; they encouraged us to work for continuous cropping by re-sowing and nurturing re-growth. Now we invite you to voyage with us as we explore what it means to be “moored to Christ, moving into mission”.

Let’s start by looking at some of the words we have just sung:

E’en now we think and speak the same,
and cordially agree,
concentered all, through Jesus’ name,
in perfect harmony.ⁱ

What pictures sprang to your mind as we sang together?

A community with a strong party line, perhaps?

If you are a mathematician, maybe a group drawn together round our love of Christ.

If you are a musician, perhaps you heard the rich harmony of a mixed voice choir.

If you are a seasoned Conference attendee, you may dream of cordial agreement – or maybe not! Methodist Conference has been known as a place for robust debate but our fellowship, sadly, is not always sweet.

Nevertheless, somehow God's call has drawn us here for another Methodist Conference.

Look at how diverse we are!

It is obvious that unity does not mean uniformity.

In fact we celebrate our diversity.

How can we be united when we are so different?

Our languages, customs, worldviews are divergent – in what ways can we be a strong community?

Let's explore some images of unity.

Early Methodist understandings were expressed in that Wesley hymn.

John and Charles Wesley were educated at Oxford and steeped in academic learning:

they thought logically, were familiar with music

and drew constantly on Scripture,

so it is not surprising that they used these images to express unity.

People through the ages have drawn on Scripture and local images to gain insight into what Christian living is about.

The Sri Lankan theologian DT Niles used the image of sharing a place of refuge in his hymn Saranam, which was sung earlier and has particular significance for Prince.

Jesus, Savior, Lord, lo, to thee I fly:
Saranam, Saranam, Saranam;
Thou the Rock, my refuge that's higher than I;
Saranam, Saranam, Saranam.ⁱⁱ

Let us move on to ask:

What do we find in Scripture? What words of Jesus bring insight?

Jesus lived in a rural setting – he drew on the life around him: from his Jewish background, fertile crops were a sign of God's blessing, and the desert highways and quiet places were where

one faced one's fears and encountered God. Jesus used his experience of home life, meals, raising animals, planting and harvesting crops. It is not surprising that the grapevine was, for him, an image of connecting with God and with each other. (John 15:1 ff)

What about us in the Pacific, in Oceania? For us, there are long white clouds and unfolding fern fronds, kumara and taro to sustain us. The unpredictable seas are the highways where we face our fears and encounter God. Here we know sheep and dairy farming, beaches and mud pools, mountain peaks and life-sustaining bush, waka and canoes, ancient and contemporary.

Nearly 30 years ago now, the NZ Anglican prayer book was written and translated into te reo Māori by a team who included Rev Rua Rakana. When they came to the phrase "we are one in Christ", they did not use words that make us think of unity as uniformity, but found an image that expresses community, togetherness and a common centre. They used the phrase: Christ is the mooring post where we tie our canoes.

Ko te Karaiti te pou herenga waka.

For me, it is a very powerful picture of life in Christ, of togetherness as a church, of what it means to be united in Christ – and yet to celebrate the diversity that is the reality of our life here in Te Hāhi and in the cultural richness of Aotearoa in the 21st century.

We hope to expand on this image and the implications of our theme during our Presidential term. *Ko te Karaiti te pou herenga waka.* Christ is the mooring post where we tie our canoes.

Christ is the centre of our lives, the anchor that holds us together. Look at the rich variety we find in our waka – large or small, fast and light or solid and slower, completed with fine

detailed carving that expresses our whakapapa and our stories, or maybe in the process of being carved, still deciding how to define ourselves. We may exchange gifts or food, listen to each other's conversation, learn from each other, journey in each other's canoes perhaps, help each other. We will find that if one crew starts rocking its boat, everyone will feel it and need to hold on tightly! We may all keep our own identity and be true to who we are, but our unity comes from being joined to the dependable mooring post that is Christ.

Christ is the mooring post where we tie our canoes. *Ko te Karaiti te pou herenga waka.*

However... being tied to the mooring post is not an end in itself.

The purpose of a canoe, of a waka, is to launch out, to move into the ocean to do the work so that the purpose of our canoes, of our waka, could be achieved; to embark on the voyage ahead of us. Moving into mission becomes the responsibility of every Christian and in particular for every Methodist.

What is mission?

The moment we leave shore, we move into mission. There are many voices calling across the tides of time and from every corner of the earth – beginning from the cry of the blood of Abel, to the cry of the wounded in Syria and the sorrow of those weeping for-lost loved ones: father, mother, children, siblings, friends.

Around our shores, within our own waters, unheard cries echo: the cry of the homeless, the growling empty stomachs of 45,000 hungry school children – this is what Christ is calling us to hear. This is where Christ is sending us to serve. If we are to hear what Christ is asking us to do, we have no option but to listen to these cries. They are being ignored by the media in our country who are not telling the whole truth. It is being left to The Guardian in UK and Al Jazeera in Doha to tell the world about

the hidden shame of New Zealand. I read the paper to understand what it is not saying, rather than what is being said.

It is risky to move into mission, but we have a choice: we may confine ourselves to worship and be an exclusive community, trying to get more people to join our hobby club. Alternately, we may heed the cries out there where Christ is and do what we can. We need to gather in worship to be moored to Christ and discern what Christ is asking us to do. Then we must move into Christ's mission.

As Christians, we follow the example of Jesus, who took God's message beyond the synagogue walls to the lakeside and villages. As Methodists, we also look to John Wesley, who stepped outside parish boundaries and preached the gospel by pit heads and in town squares.

What do we do to move into mission? Over the years we have been trying to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick and so on. While I thought of this as the mission, I became aware that we are only patching the wounds, but not treating the cause. Methodist Mission Northern has been serving the poor and needy for 155 years in Auckland city. In 2006 when elected to the Board, my first question was, how many people who received these services have come out of their trouble and re-built their lives? Norman Johnston pointed me to only one person - who happened to be a Romanian, arriving at the mission with a \$10 note in his pocket. After receiving support from the mission, he re-built his life as an accountant. My research of the model of mission as a good neighbour uncovers the creation of our own dependency for the needy in our mission: the mission needs the needy for its own existence. So here's my question: is this what Christ wants?

The sending of the seventy was a mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God. The kingdom or shalom of God is where all can enjoy the resources of creation. But the kingdoms we work

for are empires with wage-slaves. John Wesley stood against the slave trade of his day. It was supposed to be abolished. But there are still slave ships in today's world, where people over-work and are underpaid. So we have created an underclass called poor. Where is the philanthropy in donating 0.1 percent from a million dollar profit to the poor, for the satisfaction of the giver, rather than for paying fair wages to the workers?

The newly inducted Vice-President of the British Methodist Conference, Rachel Lampard, has called for the Church to stop 'problematizing' and trying to 'fix' the poor, "When we look at the poor and those in need of justice, do we see a problem – or do we recognise the face of Jesus Christ? Sadly, we have 'problematized' the poor so much that we choose to look for their faults rather than address the problems and pain that not having enough money brings."ⁱⁱⁱ

How is our current form of mission any different from Lampard's description? We have spent time fixing the poor for over a century and a half in this country, but have kept silent about the injustice, systemic in our society, that has created the poor.

We are a people called Christians, and we have our identity as Methodists. Methodism was a movement, not a stagnant club of self-interest. It is time for us to catch the wind and currents and move into mission. Do we hear the cry of Christ from among the people who call to be treated fairly? Let us look at ourselves first, round our own mooring posts: how many of our Methodist churches and institutions are intentionally paying a living wage to all their workers? I am aware of only one Methodist Parish being accredited as a living wage institution. Be it the directors, office staff or cleaners - all deserve a living wage.

It is in this situation, for the people among us, that I think Christ's call is echoed in the words of the Prophet Amos:

At God's coming we face hard reality, not fantasy—
a black cloud with no silver lining.
“I can't stand your religious meetings.
I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.
I want nothing to do with your religion projects,
your pretentious slogans and goals.
I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes,
your public relations and image making.
I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.
When was the last time you sang to *me*?
Do you know what I want?
I want justice—oceans of it.
I want fairness—rivers of it.
That's what I want. That's *all* I want.”^{iv}

There are dangers in the ocean, not just metaphorically, but also literally. Addressing them is part of our mission. Warmer than normal weather is constantly reminding us of global warming. But how many of us are aware of the rising sea levels that threaten the very existence of our Pacific neighbours? Why is it that we as Methodists have not thought of divesting shares from fossil fuel industry while the Anglican, Catholic, Presbyterian and Quakers have already done it? Where is our Methodist DNA? Have we lost it? Don't think why this Anglican is telling Methodists to be Methodists. John Wesley was an Anglican.

It is time for Christians in this land to realise that our country is not exclusively Christian any more. When we move into mission, Christ calls us to work together with neighbours of different religions or maybe no religion at all. Our goal is not “all good for a few” or even “some good for all”, but “more good for all”. David Bosch in *Transforming Mission* states: “A Christian's Mission is the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus. It is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of a community for the sake of the world.”^v

From our own mooring post in Christ, we move into mission together with people of different religions, and with those of no religion. Without insisting that they share the same mooring post as us, we move into mission together to do all good we can...

For us, being moored to Christ means being a church that moves into Christ's mission. Tim Dearborn of World Vision explains: "It's not the church that has a mission. It's the God of mission who has a church." ^{vi}

So the mission we move into must not be simply ours, or even our church's, but God's. As we gather here for Conference, before we bring our reports and consider our responses, let us take a moment to rediscover what Christ asks us to do.

We follow in the wake of the prophets, of Jesus, of John Wesley, who challenged the injustices of the day in the light of God's shalom and compassion for all. To be moored to Christ and move into mission is to identify the injustices of our day and discover how to address them.

Let us look for ways and means in this Conference to be true to our calling as Methodists.

He bids us build each other up;
and, gathered into one,
to our high calling's glorious hope
we hand in hand go on.

Moored to Christ, let us move into mission!

ⁱ Charles Wesley, *Methodist Hymn Book*.

ⁱⁱ EACC Hymnal (1963).

ⁱⁱⁱ Rachel Lampard, Methodist Conference, London, July 2016.

^{iv} Amos 5: 21-24 *The Message*.

^v David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*.

^{vi} Tim Dearborn, *Beyond Duty: A Passion for Christ, a Heart for Mission*.