

In a couple of weeks I'm going to an event to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the city of Hamilton. The focus of the gathering is how religion has shaped the values of the city and I've been asked to speak for a minute on the contribution of Methodism. I'm not sure what that says about the way people perceive us but I'm trying not to take it personally!

I was wondering what I might say when I read a recent story in the *Waikato Times* about the future of the St Paul's Methodist Church in London Street. As you know the church is currently closed because it doesn't meet earthquake standards and there's some concern in the wider community about whether the building will be preserved.

All sorts of people are now having their say about the value of the church including a local heritage consultant, Dr Ann McEwan, who was quoted as saying that she didn't think St Paul's was "the most ecclesiastical building in Hamilton" but it was an inner-city church and that was one of the reasons why it was important.

When I read that statement my initial reaction was to feel offended that Dr McEwan didn't like our church! However I then realised that her remark was actually quite a nice description of Methodism itself. It's true that we're not the most ecclesiastical of denominations; pomp and ceremony isn't our thing. But one of the really special things about the people called Methodist is the way we engage so readily with the contexts and communities in which we're set. We're a people who get involved with the world around us and seek to respond to its challenges and needs. That's been our distinctive contribution.

It's that commitment to getting engaged and being where people are at that I think I need to reflect upon and celebrate at the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

We can see that commitment to being involved firstly in our relationship with and recognition of tangata whenua. Waikato Methodism has its roots in the work of the Wesleyan missionaries who settled among Maori in Kawhia from 1834. The missionary past is one that's full of ambiguity tied as it is to the larger story of the colonisation of New Zealand.

That means Methodist history has its fair share of painful memories and regrets, of betrayals and damaged relationships; of what the New Zealand historian Allan Davidson would call living between our ideals and human realities. However our history is also one that contains stories of warm friendships and growing understanding, of mutual support and solidarity, of a bicultural journey into new trust and healing. We've hung in there together and our relationship has survived the tough times. In the twenty-first century our Methodist commitment to tangata whenua remains strong. It's a part of what makes us Methodist in this place.

The desire to engage with community and be where people are at is also present in the way Methodists have so often been involved in working for the common good. Since the days when Wesley spoke out for the poor, visited people in prison and argued against slavery Methodists have been active in works of justice and compassion.

Look around your congregations and think about the enormous contribution people have made and are still making to a host of community organisations, to all kinds of social services, to past and present struggles for justice, even to local government and civic affairs. Working for the common good is in our Methodist DNA and it's no surprise that our 10 year mission priority "Let the children live" should be one with an outward focus.

Finally the commitment to be involved in the world has made us a denomination which isn't afraid to take risks in response to the call of the Spirit. Methodists have always been a people who are prepared to go on the move, to be a church for a new time and a new place.

It's why we were the first denomination in New Zealand to ordain women: we heard the call for equality. It's why so many Methodists are part of union churches and cooperating ventures: we embraced ecumenism and the move towards church union. And it's why we've been pioneers in our acceptance of gay and lesbian people into leadership: for all our hesitations we responded to the demand for justice. There are times when this readiness to take risks gets us into deep trouble even with our own membership. However it's an aspect of our identity that reflects our original enthusiastic spirit and one that I believe has made a lasting contribution to both the wider church and the community.

These are some of the things I'd like to celebrate as the Methodist contribution to Hamilton and beyond: our relationship with and recognition of tangata whenua; our involvement in working for the common good and our willingness for the most part to take risks. As we think about our contribution in the contexts and communities in which we're set I suggest that the challenge for the next 150 years is to build on the example of those who've gone before us and to keep on being ourselves. We may not be the most ecclesiastical of churches but we are an engaged and involved people of God, there at the heart of our communities.

As John Wesley would say, let us do all the good we can, by all the means we can, in all the ways we can, in all the places we can, at all the times we can, to all the people we can, as long as ever we can. Amen.

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