

WESLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY (New Zealand)
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The SUNDAY SCHOOL in NEW ZEALAND METHODISM

by the Rev. Frank Hanson BA, BD, TheolM

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Sunday School Treat, Rangiora, about 1898.

Light in the Clearing, an Historical Survey of Methodism in Rangiora, 1959-1965,
by F A Lane, pp32-33.

Editor

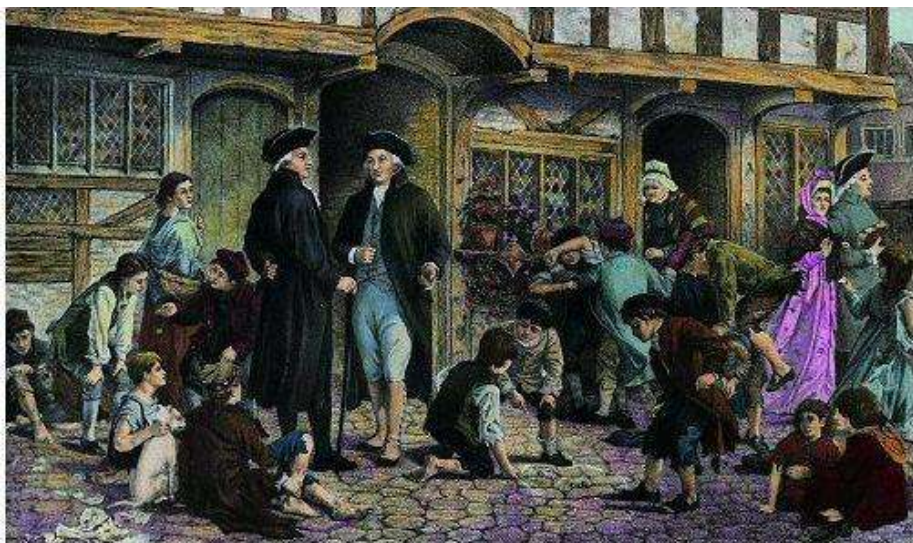
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Two scenes of Robert Raikes surveying the Sunday street scene of Gloucester 1780

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Foreword

In 1799, when revolution was abroad in France and reactionaries in Britain were concerned about radical voices, the Church of Scotland General Assembly issued a 'Pastoral Admonition' which "described Sabbath school organizers as 'persons notoriously disaffected to the Constitution'". In contrast, Methodists were identified with the radical and revolutionary dimensions of Sunday school education. While for Methodists the Sunday school was primarily concerned with Christian instruction, it also provided in its early years elementary education to people who, because of their social class and economic circumstances, were deprived of schooling.

Sunday schools have been a significant and powerful force in the life of Methodism. Perhaps because they were considered 'child's stuff' they have not received the attention from historians they deserve. How far Sunday schools took over the role of religious education from the home and thereby undermined the spirituality of the hearth is a question worthy of reflection. How far did the Church come to rely on the Sunday school to provide its future membership? How far is the decline of Methodism a reflection of the decline of the Sunday school? These are questions that need to be asked.

In an age when there were few social institutions for children, and a lack of mobility and discretionary spending meant that leisure time kept you close to home, sending the children off to Sunday school was both a social and cultural phenomenon. What impact attendance at Sunday school had on people is difficult to determine. For some it provided their only insight into Christianity - 'a Sunday school faith'. For others it became the foundation on which their later growth in Christian knowledge was based.

The Sunday school was a place for teachers and taught, but it also provided the grand public occasions - the Sunday School anniversary, the Sunday School picnic. The Church put considerable energy into nurturing and developing the Sunday school. The professionalisation of education, the impact of electronic media - particularly television, the rapid social and economic changes since the 1960s - sport on Sunday, greater mobility and leisure choices - these are some of the forces which have helped undermine the Sunday school.

Frank Hanson, in his study of the Sunday school among New Zealand Methodists, has captured the vitality, energy and commitment associated with Sunday schools in their heyday. His work is an important reminder of the way in which they were central to Methodist identity. He has honoured the deep involvement of women and men to the Sunday schools in the past. He foreshadows significant questions about the importance of the Sunday school for Methodists which he is taking up in his ongoing research. The golden age of the Sunday school movement cannot be recaptured. The continuing challenge to the Church is in finding ways in which it can communicate its faith with children so that they can grow up into a maturity of faith that sustains them throughout their lives.

Dr Allan Davidson

About the Author

The author, the Rev Frank Hanson, is currently Principal of Trinity Methodist Theological College in Auckland, New Zealand, and teaches in the areas of Christian education, homiletics, worship and Methodism in the Trinity/St. Johns setting. Prior to his present appointment in 1989 he was Director of the Methodist Education Division for eleven years, and a circuit/parish minister for eighteen years. He has also served as District Superintendent in Wellington for nine years and as President of the Methodist Church in 1984/85. He has degrees in history and theology and is currently working on a doctorate on the influence of the Sunday School in the growth and decline of New Zealand Methodism.

His life owes much to the Waiwhetu Methodist Sunday School and Bible Class in Lower Hutt - both very important in his formative years.



Wesley Historical Society Lecture 1996 Delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Wesley Historical Society, Avondale, Auckland, New Zealand, on 15 November 1996 by the Rev Frank Hanson, BA, BD, TheoL.M, Principal, Trinity Methodist Theological College.

The 1850s to the 1950s - the Century of the Sunday School in New Zealand Methodism

1 Introductory remarks

I have named this lecture The '1850s to the 1950s - the Century of the Sunday School in New Zealand Methodism'. I do not want to confine what I say to those dates as you will discover the Sunday School began before 1850 - and it continued after 1950. But for New Zealand Methodism that was its heyday. It was then that it rose to its peak - and today it is but a shadow of its former self.

2 Origins

Methodism and the Sunday School movement have always been closely allied with one another. Whereas attempts have been made to place the origins of the Sunday School movement with Martin Luther in Wittenburg,¹ or with John Knox in Edinburgh,² or with a Scottish craftsman who lived across the road from Knox and opened the first Sunday School in Sweden, it is undoubtedly true that the modern movement had its origins within the England of the second half of the 18th century - coincidentally when the work of John and Charles Wesley was at its height.

Who taught the first Sunday School in England is a matter for dispute also. A good case can be made for Hannah Ball, a Methodist of High Wycombe, whose school Wesley visited on at least one occasion when he spoke with more than 550 children.³ That was not the only time he met such groups. At another time he preached before a Sunday School of 600-700.⁴ He had correspondence with Fletcher of Madeley about the creation of Sunday Schools in that town,⁵ and with others such as Thomas Brisco⁶ and Alexander Suter.⁷ In a letter to his niece Sarah he talked about this "warm and blessed work",⁸ and on another occasion wrote of the Sunday School as "one of the

¹ Free Methodist Quarterly Magazine, May 1879, p.67

² NZ Methodist Times, 16 August 1924, p.4

³ NZ Methodist Times, 4 October 1930, p.1. See also John Wesley's Journal, 18 July 1784

⁴ John Wesley's Journal, 8 June 1790

⁵ Telford, John The Letters of John Wesley Vol.VII. London: Epworth Press, 1931, p.265

⁶ Ibid., p. 115

⁷ Telford, John The Letters of John Wesley Vol.VIII London: Epworth Press, 1931, p.23

⁸ Ibid., p. 194

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best institutions in Europe".⁹ At the Conference in 1766 he charged his ministers to "instruct the children"¹⁰ and two years later he urged them to "spend an hour a week in every large town instructing the children."¹¹

Pride of place in starting the Sunday School movement has not been given to Hannah Ball or to Hannah More and her sisters who commenced Anglican Sunday Schools in Cheddar,¹² but to Robert Raikes, whose statue, a century later, was to be unveiled on the Embankment in London. Robert Raikes was the editor of a newspaper in Gloucester.¹³ One day in 1780 a young woman drew to his attention the waywardness and aimlessness of many of the young people of a Sunday - young people who worked in indentured labour during the rest of the week.



Robert Raikes (1735-1811), Founder of the Sunday School Movement.
An Album of Methodist History, by Elmer T Clark, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press

Raikes was so moved by what he experienced that he set to work to establish some Sunday schools and to employ - note that word - some teachers who would teach the children to read and write. And of course, as a by-product, to read and write the Bible. Raikes, having access to the modern technology of the day, was able to publicise what he was doing both through his own paper and also nationally. The idea caught on like wild-fire. The sporadic attempts turned into a movement, and it was the creation of

⁹ John Wesley's Journal, 24 March 1790

¹⁰ Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1766, p.65

¹¹ Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1768, p.81

¹² Lacqueur, T W Religion and Respectability. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976, p.26

¹³ For an account see Robert Raikes: A Critical Study by G Kendall. London: Nicholson and Watson, 1939

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this movement that Raikes is given credit for, a movement which burgeoned during the next twenty years and found further shape in the creation of the Sunday School Union in London in 1803. And who was the person who brought the needs of those Gloucester youth to Robert Raikes' attention? It was Sophia Cooke, a Methodist, soon to become the wife of Samuel Bradburn, a well-known Wesleyan preacher.¹⁴

It was Methodists who began the first Sunday School in the United States of America, within a year or two of 1780. That also happened in Philadelphia which for much of the 19th century remained the leading town for Sunday school participation in the United States. A century later in 1885, when considerable growth was going on in New Zealand Methodism, Philadelphia had 555 schools, 15,000 teachers and 155,000 students, 20 of the whole population.¹⁵ Bishop Asbury was a strong advocate for the establishment of Sunday Schools in United States Methodism from the earliest days, and as soon as a church was planted, or in many cases before it was planted, the Sunday School was established.¹⁶

Methodists were also early on the ground in Scotland. Lady Maxwell, a life-long Methodist and friend of John Wesley, wrote to Alexander Mather, another close associate of Wesley, in 1787 "Will you please be so good as to send me the rules of some of the best regulated Sunday Schools with the form of advertisement previous to their being opened, and also the amount of the teacher's salary. The people of Scotland are not fond of them, but I mean to give them a trial" Three months later her Sunday school was opened with 31 scholars.¹⁷

It was Methodists too who established the first Sunday Schools in Australia, in Sydney.¹⁸ In 1820 Samuel Leigh, who was there at the time, sent back to England an account of his Sunday preaching circuit including the teaching of Sunday Schools.¹⁹

And so by the time the first Wesleyan missionaries landed in New Zealand in 1822 the Sunday School movement had already been in existence for 40 years, and Methodism already had 60 years experience of living with Sunday Schools. In fact you could almost say the Sunday School was as much a part of on-the-ground Methodism as the class meeting - and it was in fact to outlive it!

That involvement of English Methodism in the Sunday School movement was to be important for New Zealand Methodism, because it meant that by the time English

¹⁴ NZ Wesleyan, 1 July 1880, p.156ff

¹⁵ NZ Methodist, 5 December 1882, p.7

¹⁶ NZ Wesleyan, 2 July 1877, p. 160

¹⁷ Hayes, Alan J *Edinburgh Methodism: 1761-1975*. Edinburgh: Alan Hayes, 1976

¹⁸ *Methodist Magazine* 1814, p.557

¹⁹ *Wesleyan Methodist Magazine*, May 1820, p. 141

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Methodist settlers arrived in New Zealand a number of important issues had been decided and New Zealand Methodists could accept the way the Sunday School was in England in the 1840s and 1850s as their model.

For instance, the question of the basic purpose of Sunday School had been decided. Was it to be basically a place for learning to read and write, or was it to be a place of religious instruction? There had been a mixture of motives early on, but by 1823 the British Conference was saying that learning to write on the Lord's Day was prohibited.²⁰ In 1834 when it confirmed the existing rules the Conference stated that "it was entirely a religious institution and therefore for Christian instruction, and the education of the poor."²¹ That was rather different from the learning which dominated many earlier schools, especially some of the Ragged Schools.

Then too, especially under the guidance of Dr Jabez Bunting, there was a strong movement within the early 19th century to make sure that Methodist Sunday Schools were indeed Methodist Sunday Schools, and indeed under the care and control of local church authority.²² Earlier on some Sunday Schools had taken an independent line, deciding for themselves the way they would be organised. Many of them had been non-denominational. But now it was made clear by the Conference that the Superintendent minister was to chair the Sunday School meeting and Sunday Schools were to be clearly recognised as part of the local churches' work. A feature of the move through the 19th century was the way the Connexion took more and more control of the Sunday School, a movement paralleled in New Zealand also.

Further, the relationship of the minister to the Sunday School and its children was clearly spelled out.²³ No Sunday School was to meet at times which interfered with worship.²⁴ This was steadfastly adhered to even though many of the earlier Sunday schools met on a Sunday morning. Also the minister was made responsible for examining the children, publicly and privately.²⁵ At one stage it is resolved that this happen at least six monthly at the age of twelve.²⁶ In a later resolution the minister was asked to question every child thirteen or under regarding their relationship to Christ.²⁷ The minister also was part of the Sunday School meeting.

²⁰ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1823, p.429**

²¹ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1834, p.426**

²² **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1826, p.169f**

²³ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1827, p.284**

²⁴ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1817, p.337**

²⁵ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1766, p.65**

²⁶ **Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1886, p.65**

²⁷ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1842, p.394**

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By 1827 the first of a series of General Rules was put in place by the Conference, rules which were amended and up-dated from generation to generation.²⁸ The Connexion had to have its say!

Although by 1838 - two years before the Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand - it was regretfully noted that there were still 915 chapels in Britain without Sunday Schools,²⁹ yet it was affirmed on more than one occasion by the British Conference that "the Sunday School was of greatest utility and importance".³⁰ In its Address of 1845 the British Conference said that "Sunday schools continue to shed light into the minds of thousands of children who, till gathered within their enclosures, were wild as the untaught Indians brood!"³¹

The largest Sunday School in Britain was to be Stockport which at its height could number 2,000 scholars and a block of substantial buildings.³²

By 1872 there were 2.25 million children in Sunday schools in Britain - 1 million in the Church of England, 1.25 million in non-conformist Sunday schools, of whom a disproportionate number were Methodists.³³ In 1892 in Britain it could still be said that more children attended Sunday school than day school.³⁴ Another interesting Methodist statistic, was that in 1877 over one-third of the 6,000 Methodist chapels had Sunday School libraries containing nearly 700,000 volumes. The Sunday Schools contained one of the first free public libraries.³⁵

Enough of Britain then for the time being, except to reiterate that by the time the first English settlers arrived in New Zealand the Sunday School was already an intimate part of what it meant to be a Methodist Church.

You could hardly be a Methodist Church without one!

But before the English settlers there were the missionaries.

²⁸ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1827, p.284**

²⁹ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1838, p.355**

³⁰ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1826, p. 169**

³¹ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1845, p.262**

³² **NZ Primitive Methodist Magazine, 1 March 1899, p. 1346**

³³ **NZ Wesleyan, 30 September 1872, p. 130**

³⁴ **NZ Methodist, 24 September 1892, p.6**

³⁵ **NZ Wesleyan, 1 October 1877, p.232**

3 The origins of the New Zealand Methodist Sunday School Movement

When did the Sunday school movement begin in New Zealand? A case could be made for saying that it was with Samuel Leigh on board ship on the way to Australia in 1815, for he took it upon himself to teach the children.³⁶ Well actually he did not just take it upon himself. It was placed on all the Wesleyan missionaries by the Wesleyan Missionary Society!³⁷ They were told quite clearly to set up schools, where the teaching of children was to be of paramount importance.

It is an academic matter whether the education they offered can be described as 'Sunday School', but in essence the missionary educational efforts were no different from many of the earliest Sunday Schools in England. Certainly the object of the Wesleyan missionaries was to learn the Maori language, to translate (especially the Bible), to teach people to read, write and calculate, and particularly to learn such Christian documents as the New Testament, the Ten Commandments, the Apostles Creed and the Catechism.³⁸ There are numerous accounts in their journals and letters of how they went about this, sometimes in schoolrooms, sometimes in huts or the open air, sometimes on a weekday, sometimes on a Sunday.

So the origins of the New Zealand Methodist Sunday School movement can be traced back into the days of the missionaries rather than just to the settler-initiated Sunday Schools of the Wellington of 1841, the Auckland of 1843 or the Christchurch of 1851. In 1824 Leigh visited a village and instructed twenty-eight children;³⁹ in 1827 Stack recorded putting up a table and benches in a new school room⁴⁰ and finishing the Conference Catechism; in 1832 at Mangungu there were twenty-two men and boys and eight girls in classes.⁴¹ A school examination was called with only four days notice and 400 came, 100 of whom knew the Catechism, fifty were able to read and write a little, and nine or ten able to read the entire New Testament;⁴² on one Christmas day fifty-three canoes and 1,000 people arrived for a similar exam-fest.⁴³ In 1836 it is recorded that there were 400 under instruction.⁴⁴ In 1844 Whiteley received

³⁶ **Methodist Magazine 1815, p.569**

³⁷ **Methodist Magazine 1822, p.668**

³⁸ **Methodist Magazine 1859. Letter from Rev Isaac Harding, 27 May 1859,p.1051**

³⁹ **Methodist Magazine 1824, p.57**

⁴⁰ **Methodist Magazine 1827, p.485**

⁴¹ **Morley, Rev William The History of Methodism in New Zealand. Wellington: McKee and Co, 1900, p.55**

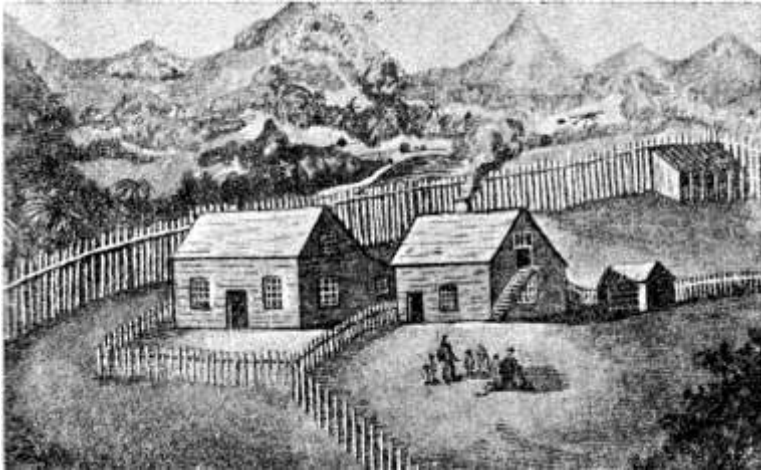
⁴² **Ibid.p.56**

⁴³ **Ibid.,p.61**

⁴⁴ **Ibid.,p.61**

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six thousand New Testaments from the British and Foreign Bible Society to be distributed, in priority, to "the good, the middling and the doubtful".⁴⁵ James Watkin could say "my schools and services, weekdays and Sundays, are as well attended as can be expected".⁴⁶



School at the Wesleydale Mission Station, Whangaroa

The History of Methodism in New Zealand, Wm Morley. McKee & Co, Wellington, 1900, p30

By the time of the visit of the Rev Robert Young of England in 1853 it is recorded that among the Maori there were 188 Sunday Schools, 88 day schools and 5,846 scholars, an increase of 20 since 1846.⁴⁷ In Pipitea, Wellington, alone, in 1848 there were five Maori Sunday Schools with a total of 500 scholars.⁴⁸ The first Wesleyan missionaries there had been accompanied by an elderly Maori, Minarapa Rangihatuake, who became the first teacher.⁴⁹ Samuel Ironside in his prolific work could point in 1849 to 787 children attending Sunday Schools in Nelson, including 300 in Motueka.⁵⁰ Creed records that in 1842 in New Plymouth Hoani Ri, a Maori missionary, gave "a most powerful oration in favour of Sunday Schools."⁵¹ The construction of schools was a

⁴⁵ *Methodist Magazine* 1844, p.691

⁴⁶ Pybus, T A *Maori and Missionary*. A H and A W Reed, 1954, p.20

⁴⁷ Morley, p. 120

⁴⁸ Morley, p.78. See also *Methodism in Wellington 1839-1989* by A L Olsson, Wellington Methodist District Synod, 1989

⁴⁹ Morley, p.78

⁵⁰ Chambers, W A *Samuel Ironside in New Zealand*. Auckland: Ray Richards Publisher, 1982, p.199

⁵¹ Morley, p.287

major undertaking and in 1871 Te Kote of the Southern District could report that "the schools - day and Sunday - were well sustained and attended. Nearly all adults and older children have acquired the ability to read the Scriptures."⁵²

But by that stage the Maori people were moving through a period of conflict and disenchantment which eventually saw the numbers in Maori Sunday Schools drop from an already low figure of 903 in 1874 to 254 in 1896.⁵³ Even by 1873 James Buller can write about "the painful contrast to the statistics of twenty years ago", and "it forces us to lament that 'the glory is departed'".⁵⁴ I think it is a truism that the number of Maori in Methodist Sunday Schools was never to return to the more flourishing days of the 1850s and earlier.

4 English settlers and the Sunday School

Quite a different movement was to occur among the newly forming pakeha settler churches. Wherever a Methodist family settled a Sunday School seemed to appear soon afterwards. Most of them came about at the initiative of lay men and women who saw it as their vocation to 'do what Methodists do' and therefore to teach their children within a Sunday School setting as well as to maintain the tradition of family prayers brought over from the home country. And so at Port Albert the Sunday school was commenced in a cottage. "Thither the faithful few journeyed on the Lord's Day, and after public worship ate their frugal lunch, which they carried with them, and then held Sunday School. Sometimes the order was reversed."⁵⁵ In Christchurch it was in Mrs Quaipe's cottage in Hagley Park, an act regarded almost as treason by the local Anglicans who dominated the settlement.⁵⁶ In Hawera it was in the Blockhouse.⁵⁷ In New Plymouth the first Sunday School Superintendent was Sgt Marjouran, the gunnery instructor with the Royal artillery.⁵⁸ In Linwood Mrs Marfield opened it in her own home;⁵⁹ at Woodend in a barn;⁶⁰ at Tua Marina James Powick started a Sunday School for his own and his neighbour's children;⁶¹ in Woodville it was the

⁵² NZ Wesleyan, 31 January 1871, p. 12

⁵³ Davidson, Allan K and Peter J Lineham Transplanted Christianity. College Communications, 1987, p. 147

⁵⁴ NZ Wesleyan, 1 July 1873, p.97

⁵⁵ Morley, p.250

⁵⁶ Fry, Ruth Out of the Silence. Christchurch: Methodist Publishing, 1987, p.45

⁵⁷ Greenwood, Wm Travelled Ways - Story of the Hawera Sunday School 1874-1951

⁵⁸ Cooper, R L A Goodly Heritage - Whiteley Methodist Church, New Plymouth.

⁵⁹ Linwood, Christchurch Golden Jubilee 1894-1946

⁶⁰ Chambers, W A Lo these are parts of his ways - Woodend 90th Anniversary, p.8

⁶¹ Tua Marina - Trinity Methodist 75th Anniversary 1875-1950, p.3

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home of Mr and Mrs David Hughes;⁶² in Karori, in a bakery;⁶³ in Kurapuna, in a tin shed;⁶⁴ in Miramar, in rooms behind a butcher's shop.⁶⁵ There is the story of Henry Jones who travelled from the Hutt Valley to settle in Masterton and started a Sunday School in his home the Sunday after he arrived.⁶⁶ Or of the arrival of Mr Lewis in Mornington. He rented the Institute in High Street, Roslyn, and preached and started a Sunday School.⁶⁷



Mary and John Quaife

Whatever the circumstances, as soon as a church was built, in true Methodist style the Sunday School moved on to the premises, sometimes into the vestry. And as soon as the church needed rebuilding, the old church became the Sunday School. And in true Methodist style the Connexion began to declare its over-arching pastoral concern. In 1855 the Australian Conference, of which New Zealand was a part, adopted a set of regulations modelled closely on the British ones.⁶⁸ Like England these Regulations too were to be amended regularly, but never in the direction of congregational autonomy.

⁶² 75 years of Methodism in Woodville, 1876-1951

⁶³ Olsson, p. 102

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p.138

⁶⁶ NZ Methodist Times, 9 December 1916, p.3

⁶⁷ Morley, p.478

⁶⁸ Minutes of the Australasian Methodist Conference 1855, p.23ff

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That there was tension from time to time between local and connexional authority both in England and New Zealand can be seen in the way similar resolutions had to be reiterated year after year, an acknowledgment that the message had not adequately been heard or actioned on previous occasions. Such resolutions cover areas as diverse as the use of the catechism, lesson materials, teacher training, the duties of ministers and provision for children in morning worship, all of which get repeated with monotonous regularity.

But to return to what was happening on the ground rather than in the

Conference! One is struck by the sense of growth and expansion that takes place from the earliest pakeha settlements through to the end of the 19th century. In Thames for example the Sunday School was opened in 1867, seven weeks after the first visit by a Methodist minister. Within ten years there were 280 scholars. By 1898 a new schoolroom was built with a central hall catering for 400, six classrooms, and rooms for a secretary and librarian.⁶⁹ I suppose that is not as big as the American Sunday School which had a postman on the staff to deal with the mail and four ushers to get children to the right places, but it is enough to show that for the Sunday School the last thirty years of the century were heady days.

But Thames was not alone. In 1845 the new Auckland Church could scarcely accommodate its congregation on such occasions as the Sunday School Anniversary. By 1849 it also had a flourishing library.⁷⁰ Pitt Street opened in 1866, and by 1876 it had a Sunday School roll of 470, and "had there been room there would have been 600."⁷¹ When the upstairs galleries were opened in the Pitt Street Church they were at first utilised only for Sunday School. By 1900 the Pitt Street Circuit comprised seven churches and had 1,245 Sunday School scholars taught by 124 teachers.⁷²

Mount Albert had a flourishing work, and new buildings to go with it. Lower Remuera in 1899 had a vigorous Sunday School work with 1,000 people under the minister's care, of whom 756 were Sunday School scholars.⁷³ Palmerston North with five Sunday Schools reached children.⁷⁴ In 1877 Wesley Wellington opened their new hall comprising a comfortable centre room, a library, Bible class accommodation and 16 classrooms. 'Model premises' they were called.⁷⁵ They had 77 scholars in 1850, nine

⁶⁹ Morley, p.227

⁷⁰ Ibid., p.203

⁷¹ Ibid.,p.210

⁷² Ibid.

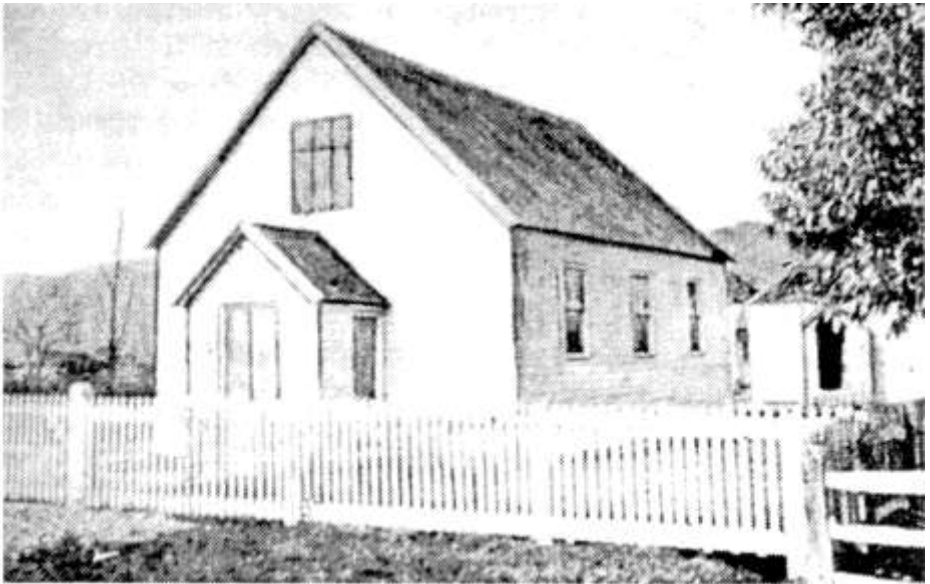
⁷³ Ibid.,p.216

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.311

⁷⁵ The Advocate, 22 July 1899, p.89. For a fuller account of the history of the Wesley Sunday School see The Centenary of Wesley Church Sunday School.

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years after they began. By 1884 they had the largest infant school in the country - 250 - and a total of 787 scholars overall. There are accounts of over 600 children singing at a Sunday School anniversary together with the church choir and a large orchestra. In addition Wesley had a library of 786 books, because a library was a common feature of the Sunday Schools of the day. According to the Minutes of Conference by 1900 Auckland Methodist Sunday School libraries totalled over 5,000 volumes.⁷⁶ In 1883 Durham Street had 1,234 volumes.⁷⁷ Hutt started its library in 1849 and kept using it until the early 1900s.⁷⁸ St Albans had over 1,000 volumes in its library at its peak.⁷⁹ Even in the 1930s E P Blamires could say of St Peter's Invercargill, "It has the best Sunday School library in New Zealand."⁸⁰



Hutt Methodist Church and School Room 1868.
'On Our Way', The First 150 Years of the Methodist Church in Lower Hutt,
NZ 1990 Official Project, p 17.

But back to the number of scholars! Napier in 1881 built new rooms to accommodate 200.⁸¹ Durham Street Circuit at its height had 1,374 Sunday School scholars in its

⁷⁶ NZ Wesleyan, 2 January 1882, p. 15

⁷⁷ Blight, W T A house not made with hands, p.22

⁷⁸ On our way - 150 years of the Lower Hutt Methodist Church 1840-1990, p.1 10

⁷⁹ Andrews, Sir Ernest

⁸⁰ Looking Backwards. St Peter's Methodist Church, Invercargill, 1847-1947
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various churches, but Wesley Church, West Belt, had even larger Sunday School numbers than Durham Street!⁸²

Colombo Road, as it was then, built a Sunday School hall in 1886 to seat 300 but considerably more attended. They had twelve classrooms.⁸³

Lyttelton Methodist Church had a Sunday school from its outset. Within months it had fifty-three students - by the end of the century 225.⁸⁴ Waimate started in 1865 with a few scholars. By 1900 they had 300.⁸⁵ Methodist statistical returns show the following situation.



Sunday School Teachers, Lower Hutt.
'On Our Way', The First 150 Years of the Methodist Church in Lower Hutt,
NZ 1990 Official Project, p 102.

⁸¹ Morley, p.358

⁸² Ibid.,p.415

⁸³ Ibid.,p.421

⁸⁴ Ibid.,p.429

⁸⁵ St Paul's Methodist Church, Waimate, 1865-1935
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Sunday School Scholars - by the decade

1855	5,148
1865	3,158
1875	9,390
1885	16,534
1895	20,074
1905	21,022
1915	30,191
1925	31,008
1935	30,133
1945	18,913
1955	25,799

Sunday School statistics at the time of Methodist Union

- as reported to the Conferences of 1911

	<i>Methodist Church</i>	<i>Primitive Methodist Church</i>	<i>Totals</i>
Sunday Schools	382	91	473
Sunday School teachers	2,364	661	3,025
Sunday School scholars	23,915	6,275	30,190

Volumes in Sunday School libraries as at 30 September 1912

Wesleyan Methodist Church	48,690
Primitive Methodist Church	<u>12,236</u>
	60,926

General statistics of Methodism 1912

<i>Denomination</i>	<i>Sunday Schools</i>	<i>Officers &Teachers</i>	<i>Sunday School Scholars</i>
Wesleyan Methodists:			
Great Britain	7,565	130,516	964,309
Ireland	358	2,504	25,269
Foreign Missions	1,968	8,491	119,900
French Conference	65	199	2,390
Sth African Conference	795	2,887	40,054
Primitive Methodists	4,311	58,795	467,516
United Methodist Church	2,388	41,832	309,318
Wesleyan Reform Union	182	2,776	22,946
Independent Methodist Churches	158	3,041	26,857
Australasian Methodist Church	4,183	24,207	229,570
United States:			
Methodist Episcopal African Union	35,445	374,881	3,567,548
Methodist Protestant African Methodist Episcopal Zion	350	900	2,770
Methodist Protestant	2,070	14,404	118,159
Wesleyan Methodist	2,034	16,680	126,031
Methodist Episcopal (South)	465	-	18,344
Coloured Methodist Episcopal	15,980	127,761	1,337,108
Primitive Methodist Free Methodist	4,007	7,098	79,876
Canadian Methodist Church	108	-	11,754
Japan Methodist Church	1,273	7,376	45,455
Totals	87,713	862,969	7,895,090

5 The influence of the Sunday School

It is no wonder that in their annual addresses the Conference could say "We rejoice in the growth of our Sunday Schools" (1860);⁸⁶ "In our children we have a deep interest" (1864);⁸⁷ "The Sunday School is a soul saving institution ... to lose the young is to lose all the harvest of the future" (1868);⁸⁸ "To our sabbath schools we look with utmost pleasure" (1870);⁸⁹ "To this department of our work the best talent should be consecrated. No other part of the field will so repay our toils" (1872);⁹⁰ "No department of church work commands sympathy so universal as does that of the sabbath schools" (1874).⁹¹

And why could the Conference enthuse so? Because quite frankly it was from the Sunday School that the Church was gaining its major growth. There may have been occasions when the spiritual temperature within the Sunday School went over the top. For instance it is said of children in one Sunday School in 1875 that "we have seen the tears of penitence roll down their cheeks!"⁹² However, it is also recorded of a revival within the Sunday School at Woodend in 1865 that one of the penitents later became Superintendent of the Sunday School at Durham Street.⁹³ Certainly the conversion of children was a major motivating force in the nineteenth century. In an article in The New Zealand Methodist in 1887, thirty reasons are given why the early conversion of children should be sought, the first being "because children are sinners, and may be lost."⁹⁴

In the early years of the twentieth century Professor G A Coe of America, one of the leading Christian educators of his day, discovered from his research that less than 5% were converted to Christianity after the age of twenty. That was 95% beforehand.⁹⁵ In other research it was discovered that of those converted between seven and 36, 20% were from seven to 12, 32% from 13 to 16, 31% from 17 to 20 and only 18% over 20.⁹⁶

⁸⁶ Minutes of the Australasian Methodist Conference 1860, p.39

⁸⁷ Minutes of the Australasian Methodist Conference 1864, p.48

⁸⁸ Minutes of the Australasian Methodist Conference 1868, p.61

⁸⁹ Minutes of the Australasian Methodist Conference 1870, p.64

⁹⁰ Minutes of the Australasian Methodist Conference 1872, p.76

⁹¹ Minutes of the Australasian Methodist Conference 1874, p.35

⁹² Free Methodist Quarterly Magazine, May 1875, p.59

⁹³ Morley, p.443

⁹⁴ NZ Methodist Times, 15 October 1887, p.3

⁹⁵ NZ Methodist Times, 21 May 1910, p.6

⁹⁶ The Outlook, 10 October 1908, p.35

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Dr Henry Swinnerton, a committed Methodist and Professor of Geology and Geography at Nottingham University earlier in the 20th century, in some further research in England established that nearly 80% of the Methodist Church's membership came from the Sunday School, with only 22% from all other sources. Although he also highlighted the fact that the Sunday School lost 80% of its scholars, and that of the remainder only 10% came into regular, committed membership, yet that number provided the majority of new members. In other words, the larger the number of scholars in Sunday Schools, the greater the increasing number in church membership. And in fact, if Sunday School numbers had remained static over the years from 1890 to 1908, the number of Methodist church members in Britain would have been 20,000 less!⁹⁷ The parallel between rising and declining Sunday School numbers and rising and declining church membership numbers is striking. No wonder the Methodist Conferences in England, New Zealand and Australia were enthusiastic. Here was the source of their future. Here was the strategy for their growth.

One of the major and continuing concerns was therefore what they came to call 'leakage', the fall-out of students from active participation after leaving Sunday School. Another was the low percentage of Sunday School scholars at public worship. So many resolutions were passed urging ministers to take children into account when conducting morning worship. Others centred on the need for a movement which would address the needs of the adolescent. Hence the establishment of the YWMBC (Young Women's Methodist Bible Class) and YMMBC (Young Men's Methodist Bible Class) movements in the early 20th century, movements almost unheard of, or only hinted at, in 19th century New Zealand Methodism.

The Sunday School movement was, to use a favoured phrase, "the whitest part of the harvest."⁹⁸ Hence the challenge of such comments as "Methodism devotes 90% of its attention to the older people and 10% to the younger - the proportion should be reversed."⁹⁹

Back in 1871 it was said that "the great end is to train as many [children] as possible to be religious and useful when on earth and to land as many as possible on the shores of the Heavenly Canaan."¹⁰⁰ We might say it differently but we know what they meant. And back in 1876 the Conference said that "no work in the vineyard secures a speedier and larger remuneration."¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ NZ Methodist Times, 31 December 1910, p.4

⁹⁸ NZ Methodist Times, 14 May 1932, p.4ff

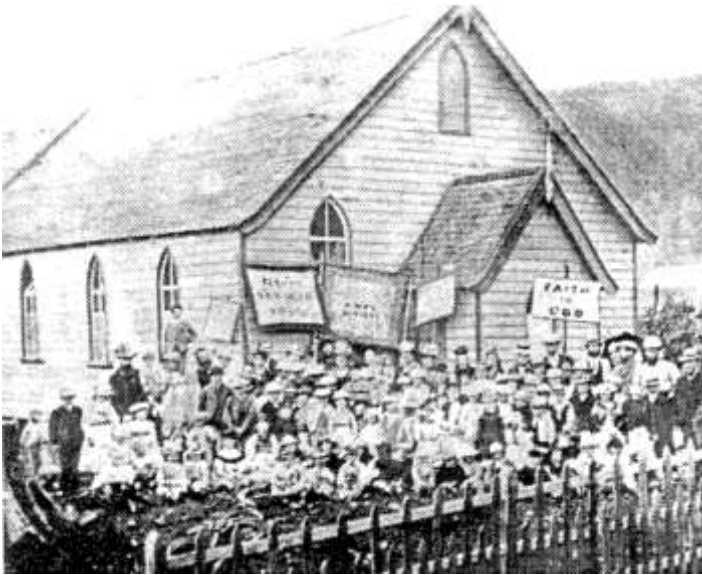
⁹⁹ NZ Methodist Times, 24 November 1923, p.9

¹⁰⁰ Wesleyan Sunday School Magazine 1871, p.226

¹⁰¹ Minutes British Methodist Conference 1876, p.229

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These sentiments were being echoed not just by the Wesleyans, but by the Primitives, the Bible Christians, and the United Methodist Free Churches as well. It was suggested at a Primitive Methodist meeting in England in 1843 that New Zealand missionaries could be sustained by yearly contributions from Sunday School teachers. And the Primitive Methodist Magazine of 1852 could say that "The Sunday School is taking an important position in the religion of the world. It is found there is greater likelihood of success in this department of Christian labour than in almost any other."¹⁰²



Sunday School children, Reefton, late 1800's.
Original source unknown

The United Methodist Free Church had as a leading section of its constitutions, "Every Church is urgently requested to establish a Sunday school in its own locality."¹⁰³ The Bible Christians could say about one of its meetings, "One pleasing feature was the fact that all Sunday school teachers were abstainers."¹⁰⁴

Sunday Schools were not only in prominence in the Methodist Churches of Australia and New Zealand. As Morley records, Methodist Sunday Schools were also grafted

¹⁰² Primitive Methodist Magazine 1852, p. 159

¹⁰³ Constitution, United Methodist Free Church (NZ), VIII (1) 'Sunday Schools', p.11

¹⁰⁴ The Bible Christian Magazine, February 1896, p.496

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into the church life of five groups of islands in the Pacific so that back at the turn of the century these contained 2,110 day schools with 39,427 scholars, and 1,819 Sunday Schools with 2,944 teachers and 40,000 scholars.¹⁰⁵



Primary Department, Wesley Wellington, early 20th century.
The Centenary of the Wesley Church S.S. 1841-1941, by W.E.Howe p20.

A feature of New Zealand Methodist Sunday Schools from the beginning was the Sunday School Anniversary with its associated treat on the following Monday or Tuesday evening, and the Sunday School picnic. The old Methodist magazines are full of accounts of these very important happenings. Marlborough, for instance, for forty years in the 19th century went on an annual picnic to Taylor's Pass. "Nearly every boy in town became a Sunday School scholar a fortnight before the picnic!"¹⁰⁶ However, listen to the discontent in this comment when the tea was cancelled and the social evening alone took place. Napier 1881, "On Tuesday the 27th there being no tea meeting, we were called upon to do what is not orthodox in Methodist circles, namely to go to a public meeting from our homes without first sitting for a cup of tea in the usual place at the church."¹⁰⁷ Or the Reefton Sunday School Anniversary also in 1881.

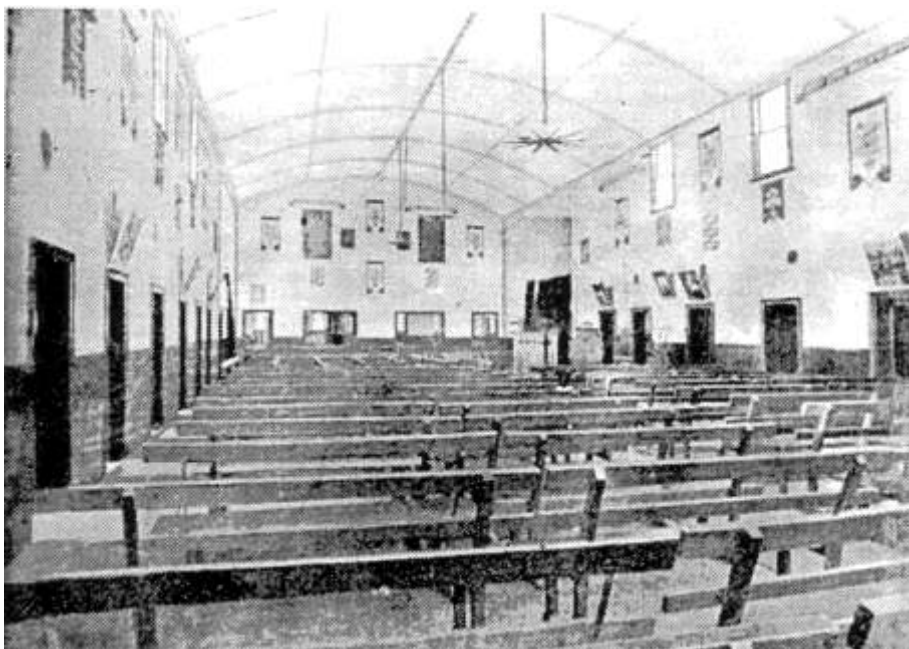
¹⁰⁵ Morley, p.401

¹⁰⁶ Methodism in Maryborough 1840-1965, p. 102

¹⁰⁷ Free Methodist Quarterly Magazine, August 1881, p. 140

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"The attendance was not large for it was a very stormy day, and all who had any experience of the West Coast know that it is pleasantest to remain home at such times. Under the circumstances the services were very successful."¹⁰⁸



Wesley Church Sunday School, Wellington.
The Advocate, July 22, 1899, p89.

And here is more interesting information. Masterton 1876, "That the Superintendent be requested to see that all children are kneeling before he commences to pray."¹⁰⁹ Marlborough, "Until World War I the Sunday School Superintendent wore distinctive clothes - frock coat, bowler hat, starched white shirt with cuff sleeves, black bow tie, and some carried a walking stick."¹¹⁰ In 1898 in North Canterbury about 70 teachers went out to their Sunday School Union Meeting in the country in drays.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ **Free Methodist Quarterly Magazine, February 1881, p.93**

¹⁰⁹ **The First Hundred Years, Masterton 1858-1958**

¹¹⁰ **Methodism in Marlborough 1840-1965, p. 102**

¹¹¹ **The Advocate (Supplement), 5 March 1898, p.936**

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6 Into the twentieth century

But by the beginning of the twentieth century the optimism was beginning to give way to some words of caution. Within Great Britain in 1897 there was the first note of disappointment over a slight decrease in numbers - a hitherto unheard of phenomenon.¹¹² Mind you, two years later they were saying words of encouragement because the decrease was only in total numbers of schools, not this time in terms of scholars.¹¹³ That is a bit like their experience in the 1930s where one year it is regretted that the total number has declined, but the next year the Conference feels satisfied because the average attendance has not!¹¹⁴



The Primary Department of the 'Modern' Sunday School.
NZ Methodist Times, September 24, 1910, p7.

¹¹² Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1897, p.450

¹¹³ Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1899, p.468

¹¹⁴ Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1931, p.404

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About the turn of the century Sunday School scholars in British Methodism had topped the one million mark. By 1908 they had slipped back to under that figure.¹¹⁵ Three years later the Education Committee would record in a fit of despondency that "the only satisfactory feature is that (this year) it is a smaller decrease than the previous year."¹¹⁶ And numbers were to continue downwards until Methodist Union brought all the Methodist groupings together in 1933 and they could talk about 1.2 million once again.¹¹⁷ But not for long! By 1938 there were 320,000 less than in 1932.¹¹⁸ That figure too kept sliding until just after the Second World War and the baby boom. Figures increased slightly from year to year until 1953.¹¹⁹ From thereon in the United Kingdom it has all been downhill. By 1958 it could be said that "every Sunday we see 2,000 for the last time."¹²⁰ In 1975 the figures returned were little more than a quarter of a million.¹²¹ The last recorded figure I can find was 1984 when it was down to 175,000 - over one million less than at Methodist Union only 50 years before.¹²² The Sunday school for all intents and purposes had run its course.

Interestingly, while the United Kingdom figures were falling in the earlier part of the twentieth century the world Methodist figures were rising, mainly as a result of what was happening in the United States where Christian education had taken a different tack and the all-age Sunday School had become the vogue.¹²³

In New Zealand it may have been slower in coming but the result has closely paralleled the United Kingdom experience. But the outcome of the 1960s and beyond was still a long way off when viewed from the early 1900s. The Sunday School still had a lot of living!

¹¹⁵ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1908, p.492**

¹¹⁶ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1911, p.504**

¹¹⁷ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1933, p.446**

¹¹⁸ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1938, p.329**

¹¹⁹ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1953, p. 197**

¹²⁰ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1958, p.74**

¹²¹ **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1975, p.75**

¹²² **Minutes of British Methodist Conference 1984, p.47**

¹²³ **For an excellent survey of this shift see From Sunday School to Church School by Jack L Seymour, University Press of America, 1982**

7 Sunday School Unions and Conventions

What then are some of the pointers to Sunday School life in the 20th century? There was the introduction of Sunday School Unions which had begun back in the late 1800s. Following the lead of the British Conference, the New Zealand Conference set up a Connexional Sunday School Union in 1874.¹²⁴ It also devised District Sunday School Unions and Circuit Sunday School Unions. Their acceptance was uneven. After twenty-two years only thirty-seven schools had joined the Connexional Union and it was eventually terminated in 1904.¹²⁵ But there were active District Sunday School Unions in places such as Auckland, Dunedin and Wellington, some of which eventually became non-denominational. North Canterbury, which was a strong advocate for the Connexional Union, was encouraged to continue and it made an immense contribution to the formation and continuation of the North Canterbury Sunday School Union. But although these Unions contributed ideas and methods across the Sunday School spectrum, one wonders whether in the end they took too much energy away from the local arena. Allied to this was the provision of Sunday School Conventions in Districts, and from 1908 on a Dominion level.¹²⁶

8 Training and teaching methods

The conventions brought much greater interaction among superintendents and teachers, and also enabled a forum for the exchange of new ideas. The birth of the new century saw increased calls for the more adequate training of Sunday School teachers, for teacher examinations, and for teacher training courses.¹²⁷ Part of this came about because of the influence of compulsory education from 1877 along with the increased provision for training secular teachers.¹²⁸ The gap between the professional school teacher and the amateur Sunday School teacher began to grow and training was necessary. Also better facilities and equipment. Blackboards, easels, sandtables, large figures, began to be increasingly used.¹²⁹ Mr George Tiller, for many years Superintendent of the Taranaki Street Infant Department, was instrumental in bringing into New Zealand Methodism an assortment of new ideas which he broadcast at conventions and training events. Having observed, like some other influential leaders early in the century, the latest American methods by visiting their Sunday Schools, he saw to it that cradle rolls, birthday chairs and other innovations were put into use. In

¹²⁴ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1874, p.21

¹²⁵ The Outlook 11 June 1904, p.36

¹²⁶ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1909, p.70

¹²⁷ The Advocate, 7 November 1896, p.228f

¹²⁸ Ibid. See also The Outlook, 18 March 1905, p.36

¹²⁹ The Advocate, 22 July 1890, p.90

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one year the Wesley Infant Department sent out over 200 birthday cards to the cradle roll children.¹³⁰

E P Blamires could say in 1922, "Great advance has been made in the Primary Department during the past generation. In the grades that follow we have not kept pace. When a child leaves a happy primary room with sand table, blackboard, birthday chairs, marching music, etc, it may be a sudden drop to dull routine in 'the main school'."¹³¹

There are other interesting accounts of new, different teaching methods. In 1906 Mr Habershaw, the Superintendent at Broad Bay, following the secular schools, introduced individual books - a first.¹³² In Thames, at one stage, all the bad boys were put in a separate class! That is not as bad, however, as another school where a bad boy was put in the girls' class.¹³³ Then there was the Round 'O' system which gave prizes to those who were never absent and never late - and often as well as having a first class category they had 2nd class and 3rd class also.¹³⁴ In 1917 Papakura gave special prizes to the twelve who had attended all fifty-three Sundays.¹³⁵



Foundation SS Staff, Trinity, Palmerston North. (About 1895.)

The Last Ripple; A Century of Methodism in the Manawatu, John R Grigg, p 48.

¹³⁰ **The Advocate**, 24 November 1900, p.217

¹³¹ **NZ Methodist Times**, 28 October 1922, p.4

¹³² **The Outlook**, 8 September 1906, p.37

¹³³ **Harris, H P Century of Light. Thames Methodist Church 1867-1967**

¹³⁴ **NZ Wesleyan**, 1 October 1877, p.232

¹³⁵ **NZ Methodist Times**, 3 March 1917, p.12

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Innovations in building plans were also on the move. It has already been indicated that new Sunday School buildings in the late 19th century were incorporating smaller classrooms around a main hall.¹³⁶ A feature of the 20th century which was to continue through into the 1930s was the number of churches that built Sunday Schools - Invercargill, Papanui, Edgware Road, Napier, Waimate, Shirley, Mornington, Riverton, Stoke, Somerfield, to name but a few.¹³⁷ In 1914 the people of the Vogeltown Church put up a new Sunday School building in a day.¹³⁸ And nine years later so did the church at Frankton.¹³⁹ 1926 saw the opening of the new Centenary Hall at Dominion Road, a building with comfortable seating for 450, with separate entrances for boys and girls, with classrooms along the northern side to provide for maximum light and warmth, and with a removable panel across the main hall.¹⁴⁰



Sunday School Staff, Dominion Road, 1947.
Dominion Road, Golden Jubilee Reunion, 1897-1947.

¹³⁶ See for instance the references to Thames, Dominion Road and Colombo Road

¹³⁷ Various references are made in the Methodist magazines of the day

¹³⁸ NZ Methodist Times, 24 January 1914, p.6

¹³⁹ NZ Methodist Times, 17 March 1923, p.4

¹⁴⁰ NZ Methodist Times, 30 January 1926, p.38

9 Lesson material

And what about the lesson material? A major advance had been the introduction of the International Series of Sunday School Lessons in 1877, initially an American publication but soon a joint American and British enterprise.¹⁴¹ These were sometimes known as the Uniform lessons because they aimed to provide the same lessons across the Sunday School on each Sunday. Within a year they were being used by over 6 million children, including New Zealand Methodists.

The creation of the Religious Education Association in the United States in 1903, exactly a century after the beginning of the London Sunday School Union, led to a rethinking of what was being provided.¹⁴² Formed by influential Christian educators determined to take seriously the newer insights of modern education and psychology and biblical criticism, the Association took issue with many of the methods used and the biblical interpretations being taught within the Sunday School setting. The outcome was a move towards a standard grading of Sunday Schools and the production of Graded Lessons in place of Uniform Lessons, first of all by a joint American/English group, and then separately in each country.¹⁴³ From there on we find American graded lessons and English graded lessons. To add confusion - or was it clarity? - 1918 saw the establishment of a Committee of the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches in Australia to produce their own set of graded lessons.¹⁴⁴ Their New Zealand partner churches were soon invited to contribute and became partners in 1924 of the enterprise which led in later years to the Joint Board of Christian Education.¹⁴⁵

In some ways the 1920s and 1930s can be termed 'the battle of the lessons' as each series had its own strong advocates. Among these was Mr A H Reed, a long-time enthusiast on behalf of the British Lessons which he sold through his retail outlet. A man who contributed considerably to the Sunday School movement, especially when the Sunday School Committee was moved to Dunedin in 1908, A H Reed would not submit to 'the Connexional view', and through letters to the church paper, articles, and lectures to teachers' conventions, kept up a running battle.¹⁴⁶ His main protagonist was the indomitable Rev E P Blamires, long-serving head of the Young People's and Children's Department from 1922 to 1939. 'E P' brought with him considerable energy

¹⁴¹ NZ Wesleyan, 1 June 1877. p. 128

¹⁴² The Outlook, 7 March 1903, p.38

¹⁴³ The Outlook, 26 September 1908, p.35

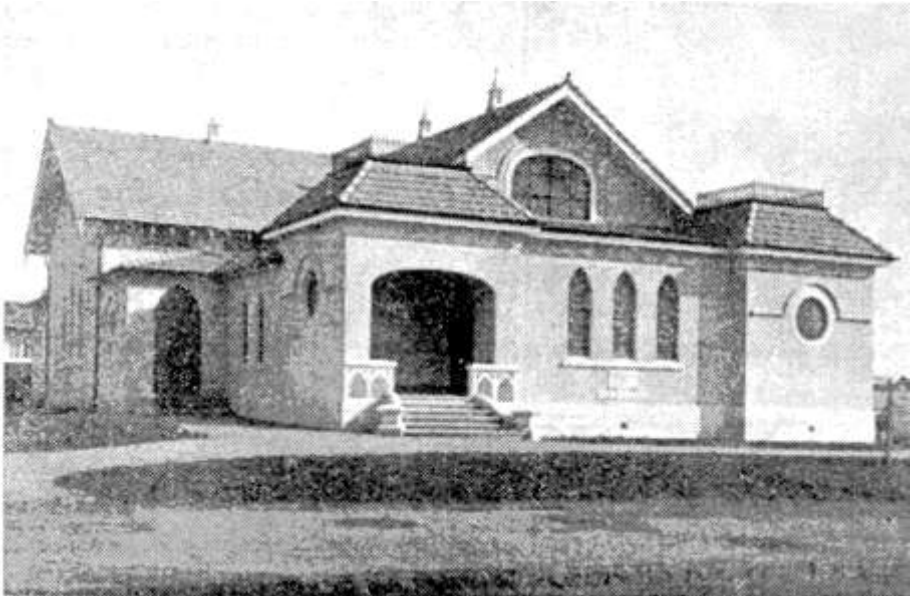
¹⁴⁴ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1917, p.52

¹⁴⁵ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1925, p.58

¹⁴⁶ As an example, see NZ Methodist Times, 24 October 1936 and 14 May 1932, p. 15

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and enthusiasm for the job. He once said "I have Sunday Schools on the brain!"¹⁴⁷ When he became President in 1936 his Presidential address was entitled, predictably, "The Church's Great Commission - Childhood and Youth!"¹⁴⁸ He was the major force behind the Children's Year of 1923, a year of intensive recruitment when Sunday Schools like Takapuna went from ninety to over 200 scholars,¹⁴⁹ Nelson added 100,¹⁵⁰ Devonport added seventy¹⁵¹ and Dominion Road became the largest Methodist Sunday School in the country with nearly 500.¹⁵² Takapuna, by the way, was quoted by E P Blamires with much pride, as the Trustees there had decided to move towards a more central site, and instead of building a church to also be used as a Sunday School, they built a Sunday School to also be used as a Church.¹⁵³



Newly opened Takapuna Sunday School and Church.
NZ Methodist Times, January 17, 1925, p 1 of Supplement.

¹⁴⁷ *The Bulletin* No.6, September 1923, p.1

¹⁴⁸ *NZ Methodist Times*, 6 June 1936, p.42ff

¹⁴⁹ *NZ Methodist Times*, 26 April 1923, p.4

¹⁵⁰ *NZ Methodist Times*, 26 April 1923, p.4

¹⁵¹ *NZ Methodist Times*, 10 November 1923, p.4

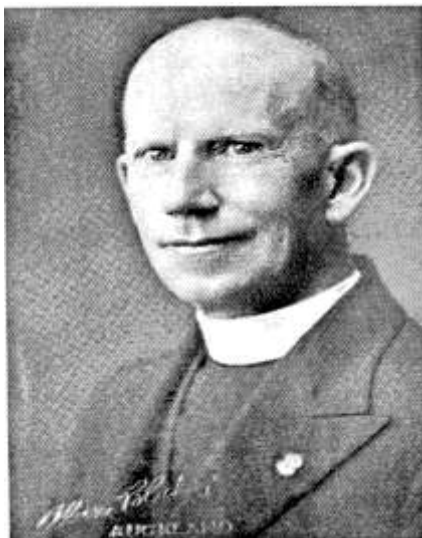
¹⁵² *NZ Methodist Times*, 26 May 1923, p.11

¹⁵³ *NZ Methodist Times*, 17 January 1925, p.1

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After placing its curriculum choices in various directions over a number of years the Conference eventually staked its claim with the graded lessons of the Joint Board.¹⁵⁴ A 1925 Conference resolution expressed congratulations for the arrangements with the Australasian Graded Lessons, and said that "this system alone has promise of universal adoption by New Zealand schools." By 1939 it was willing to record that "each year's experience confirms more surely the fact that the right action was taken when our church adopted the Australasian Graded Lessons."¹⁵⁵ If only the Sunday Schools had adopted them too! Independently-minded superintendents and teachers have always continued to go their own way and there has never been unanimity over curricula despite official commendations from those days to these.

A H Reed, although losing out in that battle, was a far-seeing person who in 1930 presented to the church a detailed plan for Sunday morning programmes including both worship and Sunday School, this at a time when the vast majority of classes were afternoon classes.¹⁵⁶ And as a symbol of truce, E P Blamires could say in the same year "The Sunday Schools of the future will be schools of the church to which everyone in the church belongs from the youngest to the oldest."¹⁵⁷ The family church of the 1960s, modelled on the American experience, had been foreshadowed.



Rev. E. P. Blamires

¹⁵⁴ NZ Methodist Times, 22 November 1924, p.4

¹⁵⁵ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1939, p.58

¹⁵⁶ NZ Methodist Times, 9 August 1930, p.8

¹⁵⁷ NZ Methodist Times, 29 November 1930, p.4

10 Changing emphasis

Many Sunday Schools had been held in the morning back in the earlier 1800s, but the move towards afternoons had been widespread in the latter half of the 19th century. Circuit plans testify to this. Afternoons became the vogue. However, by 1937 it was reported that Sunday Schools were increasingly moving again towards the morning, and that in fact forty had changed from the afternoons.¹⁵⁸ Ten years later the change was almost universal. One of the factors was the wider advent of the car, described in 1931 as a hindrance, but grudgingly acknowledged as being in some places a conveyance for collecting the children themselves.¹⁵⁹

The decline of the Sunday School in New Zealand Methodism had been foreshadowed in the early years of the century when the first decrease in numbers was noticed.¹⁶⁰ Even back in 1896 there had been a major article in *The Advocate* raising the question of how the Sunday School could be so changed that older students in particular would be retained.¹⁶¹ Methods, standards, length of lessons, larger classes, buildings, furnishings, libraries, Sunday School worship, were all canvassed. In the Conference review of statistics in 1901 it was stated that "in going forward to the duties of another Connexional Year ... we need to give greater attention to the children."¹⁶² A year later it was deploring the fact that "we have to report a further decline - ten per cent fewer children compared to five years previously."¹⁶³ In 1904 the Conference Address to the Methodist people talked of "a serious decline in the number of junior members ..." but then went on boldly to say that "Sunday School returns show a gratifying increase."¹⁶⁴ The Methodist paper in 1905 produced an editorial on 'Sunday School Aggression' and went on to say, "there is a need of aggressive work in connection with our Sunday Schools."¹⁶⁵ Reporting on the Conference that year the Rev G W Spence could write that "it was considered that the time was fast approaching when the whole system of Sunday School teaching should undergo complete remodelling."¹⁶⁶

Although a year later they could say that "our Sunday Schools, which some time ago were causing us grave anxiety, are now showing an upward tendency", in fact the

¹⁵⁸ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1938, p.61

¹⁵⁹ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1931, p.58

¹⁶⁰ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1902, p.24

¹⁶¹ *The Advocate*, 7 November 1896, p.228

¹⁶² Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1901, p.56

¹⁶³ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1902, p.24

¹⁶⁴ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1904, p.24

¹⁶⁵ *The Outlook*, 21 October 1905, p.3

¹⁶⁶ *The Outlook*, 18 March 1905, p.36

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longer term decline continued.¹⁶⁷ So much so that plans were put in place for a recruitment year in 1914-15.¹⁶⁸ But the First World War put an end to that and instead the church was left frantic at having to replace 6,200 of its young men, members of the Youth Movement and Sunday School teachers who had been drafted overseas.¹⁶⁹ A Conference resolution of 1915 asked Sunday Schools to put up Rolls of Honour to record the names of those who went to the War. Some of them still remain.¹⁷⁰

1915 also saw a visit by Mr W F Freeman, lecturer to the Sunday School Department of the British Conference. He emphasised the importance of the Primary Department, said that every Sunday School should have a home department, and laid special emphasis on the personality and training of the teachers. He considered six items essential: separate accommodation for the Primary Department, special furnishings, the use of 'expression' exercises, small classes, graded material and weekly teachers training classes.¹⁷¹

By 1917, in a Supplementary Report on Sunday School statistics, it was commented that "the state of our Sunday schools clearly demands the closest scrutiny on the part of the Conference", entirely the opposite sentiment to that expressed forty years beforehand.¹⁷² It bemoaned the fact that ninety-three circuits had not received a senior scholar into membership. And in 1921 it reported that the Sunday School statistics were disquieting. There had been a decline of twenty-nine schools and 2,236 scholars.¹⁷³ Among the given causes were the flu epidemics. Which was at least more genuine than the excuse of an Auckland church for 80% absenteeism in its Sunday School - the hot February weather!¹⁷⁴

But the struggle for the Sunday School had not been given up. In the Conference Report of 1929 there are reported "thirteen marks of progress in recent years":¹⁷⁵

- 1 A better type of Sunday School architecture.
- 2 Despite modern distractions we have maintained our Sunday School attendance.
- 3 The reform of the Primary Department is now universal.

¹⁶⁷ **Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1906, p.27**

¹⁶⁸ **Minutes of General Conference, Methodist Church of Australasia 1913, p.85**

¹⁶⁹ **NZ Methodist Times, 31 March 1917, p. 12**

¹⁷⁰ **Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1917, p.56**

¹⁷¹ **NZ Methodist Times, 20 February 1915, p.9**

¹⁷² **Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1917, p.53**

¹⁷³ **Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1921, p.57ff**

¹⁷⁴ **NZ Primitive Methodist, 1 February 1911,p.41**

¹⁷⁵ **Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1930, p.57f**

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- 4 There is some definite improvement in staffing, worship, the quality of the teaching and discipline.
- 5 Our Bible Class movement is one of the healthiest youth organisations we know.
- 6 An increasing number of churches are stemming the outward drift of senior scholars.
- 7 More children come to morning worship and to Communion.
- 8 There is more attention to children's Church Membership.
- 9 There are more Church Membership Classes and more Public Recognition Services.
- 10 There are more volunteers for Missions and candidates for the Ministry.
- 11 The standard of Young People's social gatherings is steadily rising.
- 12 The Young Men's and Young Women's Movements are now better related to each other.
- 13 There is a better understanding in the mutual relationships of Sunday Schools, Bible Classes and Church.

Which introduces the youth movement about which a word needs to be said. An article early in the century raised the issue, "Is the Bible Class part of the Sunday School?"¹⁷⁶ The answer was a resounding YES. But that is not how things turned out, and eventually the youth movements of the twentieth century not only rivalled, but, in status at least, overshadowed the Sunday School, taking on a higher and higher profile. For the Sunday School the change in relationships was obviously shown in 1933 with the establishment in Wellington of the Youth Board.¹⁷⁷ Though responsible for children's work as part of its brief this tended to become the junior partner under that umbrella-name.

This, however, was not yet the death-knell. The baby-boomer years after World War Two again led to an increase in Sunday School numbers as also happened in the United Kingdom.¹⁷⁸

There is a story that comes out of Waiwhetu, the church where I attended Sunday School. It is recounted that in May 1933, before I was born, two Sunday School primary teachers used to visit every Sunday morning between 8.30 and 9.30 the homes of scholars whose mothers had made the excuse that they did not have time to prepare their children for Sunday School. They would make themselves useful by dressing the children, washing the dishes and doing other household chores!¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ NZ Methodist Times, 17 August 1919, p.14. See also NZ Methodist Times, 14 May, p10

¹⁷⁷ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1933, p.61ff

¹⁷⁸ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1946, p.70

¹⁷⁹ NZ Methodist Times, 27 May 1933, p.7

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Numbers continued to grow so that by 1955 an all-time high for children and youth within New Zealand Methodism could be reported at 38,949. However, by now new halls were being called youth halls; camp sites were catering for youth camps and family camps. The emphasis was changing, and for the Sunday School the tide was beginning to run out. In 1951 it was projected that schools rolls which had risen by 35,000 in 1950 would rise by 45,000 in 1960.¹⁸⁰ But Sunday Schools were not keeping pace with population growth. In 1957 Cradle Roll and Beginners Department Rolls were static against a school population increase during the 1950s of 57.¹⁸¹ It was time for a new direction signalled clearly by the Connexional Board in 1963: "The Board is convinced that the key age-group in building a strong effective church is the adult".¹⁸² During the nineteenth century it had been the child that had been to the fore in Christian education. As the twentieth century wore on it appeared to be the youth. From the 1960s onwards the focus became increasingly the adult, and therefore correspondingly less so upon the child.

What can be said in the face of this?

The Sunday School movement was basically a lay movement and relied for its success and continuation mainly upon lay energy. Although both the Connexion and the ordained ministry had important relationships with the movement it depended absolutely upon a large team of sincere, dedicated and highly motivated lay people.

¹⁸⁰ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1951, p.63

¹⁸¹ Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1957, p.77

¹⁸² Minutes of NZ Methodist Conference 1963, p.79

11 People who served New Zealand Methodist Sunday Schools

As a kind of a litany and to symbolise many thousands of others who also taught let me introduce a listing from a variety of Methodist sources of some of the people who served New Zealand Methodist Sunday Schools with vigour and commitment:

W A Earle, Wanganui - 27 years

James Knight, Lower Hutt - associated with the Sunday School for 60ears, 25 of them as Superintendent

J S Wellsman, Napier - 25 years as Superintendent

'Father' Tully of the Infant Department, Durham St

Mrs Allen, Lyttleton - 50 years

S W Goldsmith, Waimate -Sunday School Superintendent to the end of his life

R A Bowbyes, Rugby Street -62 years

George Tiller, Taranaki Street, 52 years



Mr George Tiller
The Advocate, July 22, 1899, p90.

O C Hames, Paparoa - 50 years

W C France, Sunday School Superintendent, Linwood - 26 years

C E Daniell, Masterton - 50 years as Sunday School Superintendent

James Taylor of Tawa Flat - "at 87 he never misses a Sunday"

D Goldie, Alexandra Street Sunday School - 50 years

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J A Miller and W Croad, Thames - 30 years

Mrs Jean Hay, Durham Street Kindergarten - 30 years

W H Foster, Rangiora - Superintendent 24 years

Cecil Ayers, Rangiora Teacher and then Superintendent - 37 years

George Winstone, Pitt Street Superintendent - 25 years

V H Smart, Blenheim Superintendent - 31 years

Mrs Rose, Mrs McArthur and Mrs Hall - between them Kindergarten Superintendents in Blenheim over a period of 60 years

Gordon Bennett, Palmerston North - Superintendent, 21 years

Edgar Lock, Palmerston North - Sunday School Secretary, 36 years

C H Earwaker, Cambridge Tee - Superintendent, 24 years

H Chaplain, Cambridge Tee - Sunday School Secretary, 30 years

Mrs Verna Allott, St Peters, Invercargill - 25 years

W J Kirk, Petone - Sunday School Superintendent, 18 years

Joseph Watkinson, Edward Street Primitive Methodist Church and Dominion Rd - 60 yrs

W H Melhuish, Petone - 30 yrs Superintendent

G A Buttle, for many years Superintendent, Kingsland

Lila Rose, long-time Beginners Department teacher at Westport

William Ettrick, Ettrick - 42 years as Superintendent,

E C Paterman, Woodend - 53 years as teacher including 25 as Superintendent

C B John, Tua Marina - 43 years

George Botham, Tua Marina - 54 years

W S Harris, Tua Marina - still going strong in 1950 after 37 years

S Allison, Penrose - 28 years as Superintendent

E C Smith of Gore - 50 years involvement, including 25 as Superintendent

W T Coad, Hamilton, Westport, Blenheim and Wellington - 50 years as Superintendent

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J Treloard, Hamilton - 30 years as Superintendent

W E Wood, Hamilton - 25 years as Sunday School Secretary

F Paltridge, Waihi - 36 years

John Beecroft, many years as Superintendent at Port Albert

James Ward, Tawa - 60 years.

And all these without mentioning further:

A H Reed

Ned Seddon

George Bond

C T Symons

E P Blamires

Wilf Ford.

We honour these and thousands of others like them. But in honouring them it is important that we do not feel guilty that we cannot do as they have done. One of the most debilitating outcomes of the change in the Sunday School movement has been the amount of guilt generated by the fact that the Sunday School is not what it used to be. We live in a different day. I doubt whether New Zealand Methodism will ever return to the heady Sunday School days of the past, or whether any church will. The future does not lie in a revival of the Sunday School as it used to be. Perhaps we need to acknowledge that and lay it to rest, and work strenuously at finding the new ways for the 21st century, ways more in tune with our technology and changed life-styles.

12 Conclusions

Methodism had a very heavy investment in the Sunday School movement. It has been one of its chief allies and advocates from the very beginning. When there were 30 million children in the Sunday Schools of the world, Methodism had responsibility for over 10 million of them.¹⁸³ Within New Zealand the Methodist church which never reached more than nine per cent of the population had Sunday Schools for twenty per cent of the children.¹⁸⁴ Throughout the first one hundred years of its history the Sunday School was the chief source of recruits for membership of the church. It is no wonder the demise of the Sunday School has meant a fall-off in membership. We Methodists had more to lose from its down-turn proportionately than any other church. The Sunday School was our major recruiting base. And I doubt if our church has ever stopped to ask the question, "If we do not get our members from the Sunday School, where do we get them from?"

Again, within the 20th century the Sunday School suffered increasingly from being under the shadow of the youth movement to which originally it gave birth. Work among youth gained a higher profile as well as increased resources, often at the expense of the Sunday School. Yet in the end the youth movement also suffered because its own recruitment base was shrinking as the Sunday School shrank, and the youth movement has been no more successful than the adult church in finding its recruiting base from any other source.

Society has changed. The alternative amusements and occupations for children have expanded. Life is different to the days when the Sunday School was the major social activity for children within the community and from when the lantern slide show in the Sunday School hall was the latest novelty. Education has expanded, and with it the secularism of the 1877 Act has had a profound long-term impact upon the way we think and act as a society.

The Sunday School has had its finest hour. That was back in the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Like the church has had to do on a number of earlier occasions in its history it needs to continue to look for new directions when the old one will no longer work. We thank God for what has been. We honour the men and women who made it possible. But for us, I believe we need not be left wondering and gasping, but believe that God continues to work for us and the future, and like them to give ourselves afresh to bringing God's purposes about.

¹⁸³ NZ Methodist Times, 13 September 1924, p.4

¹⁸⁴ NZ Methodist Times, 19 November 1927, p. 13.
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