

METHODIST MISSION AND ECUMENICAL NEWSLETTER

September 2020

MISSION IN SOLOMON ISLANDS

The mission of the Methodist Church of New Zealand Te Hahi Weteriana O Aotearoa to the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea can be seen as the jewel in the crown of our churches' response to the great commission. We can celebrate those who went to work on the mission field over many years as ministers, nurses, midwives, doctors, builders and teachers. With indigenous leadership today in both national churches, there is a vitality about church life that responds to their context and cultural traditions.

In preparation for my time as acting director of Mission and Ecumenical I read C. T. J. Luxton's *Isles of Solomon* (1955). The book provides an overview of the work from the time J. F. Goldie arrived in the Solomons as pioneer missionary in 1902. The book outlines the challenges that were faced, the questions that were raised and the ways in which the church adapted to the cultural expectations. We are introduced to leading personalities and the witness of indigenous Christians to the faith. Luxton writes about peace-making, education, worship, church planting and translation of the scriptures.

I would like to encourage parishes to become aware of this history as we consider the shape of mission in the future. The support of Mission and Ecumenical for our partners-in-mission in the Solomon Islands remains an important part of their life. As I complete these two and a half years as acting director I commend this aspect of the work of our church to parishes and rohe and trust that it will continue to be supported. Terry Wall.

WEST PAPUAN ASPIRATIONS RECOGNISED

On September 13 at a ceremony in Docklands Melbourne a tree will be planted to commemorate the second general secretary of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjold who was a strong advocate of West Papuan self-determination. The National Churches of Australia is expressing its solidarity with West Papuans in this way in the hope that, after years of repression, its cause will be heard in the United Nations.

HAGIA SOPHIA NO LONGER A MUSEUM

Debate has broken out regarding the status of Hagia Sophia, the remarkable building in the centre of Istanbul. Constructed under the Byzantine emperor Justinian I and completed in 537 as the cathedral for the Eastern Church, the architecture has been praised as one of the wonders of the world that has survived since the early church. As part of a Trinity College group of pilgrims, I was amazed at the stunning building which preserves ancient mosaics and icons of the Christian faith near the ceiling.

The cathedral remained a place of Christian worship until the fall of Constantinople in 1453 when the Ottomans under Mehmed II conquered the city set up their capital. The vast cathedral became a mosque for Moslem worship until, under Kemal Ataturk it was

made into a museum in 1934. Subsequently UNESCO declared it to be a World Heritage Site in 1985, recognising the significance of the structure. As such it attracted large numbers of visitors, four million in the year 2019 alone.

In July of this year Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan with a political agenda announced his decision to turn Hagia Sophia back into a mosque. In Turkey there was considerable support for this but the decision was not received with universal acclaim.

The interim general secretary of the World Council of Churches Rev. Prof. Dr Ioan Sauca wrote to President Erdogan noting that “since 1934 Hagia Sophia has been a place of openness, encounter and inspiration for people from all nations and religions.” Commenting further Sauca wrote, “I am obliged to convey to you the grief and dismay of the World Council of Churches at the step that you have taken. By deciding to convert the Hagia Sophia back to a mosque you have reversed that positive sign of Turkey’s openness and changed it into a sign of exclusion and division. Over the years the World Council of Churches has made great efforts to support the active engagement of our member churches in inter-religious dialogue, in order to build bridges of mutual respect between the different religious communities...” The general secretary saw that this move will “inevitably create misunderstandings, suspicions and mistrust undermining our efforts to bring people of different religious faiths together at the table of dialogue and co-operation.”

The Christchurch *Press* noted that Pope Francis has joined a ‘chorus of criticism’ to condemn President Erdogan’s decision to convert the Hagia Sophia museum in Istanbul into a mosque. Speaking to pilgrims in the Vatican he said, “I am deeply pained.” Archbishop Ieronymos of Athens and All Greece announced a day of mourning and remarked that “it was an unholy act of sacrilege of not just a holy spiritual centre for our Orthodox faith, of Christianity in general, and of a symbol of our faith but an ecumenical cultural monument and symbol of the mutual rapprochement of peoples, of people with different religious identities.”

HEALING THE WORLD: EIGHT BIBLE STUDIES FOR SUCH A TIME AS THIS

The global Covid-19 pandemic, which has brought death to hundreds of thousands, and serious illness to millions more, also poses profound spiritual questions and real challenges to churches everywhere. The pandemic itself has been a fundamental test of our faith in God and God’s providence and it requires of us urgent re-examination of our relationship to God, each other and the natural world.

In *Healing the World*, the World Council of Churches offers eight Bible Studies to facilitate our coming to terms – as individuals, groups and communities of faith – with the loss, fear and confusion engendered by the pandemic, and the bracing prospect of building a new world. The studies may be downloaded from the World Council of Churches website.

World Council of Churches *News Service*

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