

Report on a visit to Samoa
for the
Methodist Consultative Council of the Pacific (MCCP)
April 2015
Partnership Coordinator Asia/Pacific – Steve Pearce

Aims

- To represent Methodist Church Britain (MCB) at the biennial meeting of MCCP

Background

The MCCP comprises all seven MCB partners in the Pacific: Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga, Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma, Methodist Church New Zealand, Methodist Church Samoa, United Church Papua New Guinea, Uniting Church of Australia, United Church in the Solomon Islands. All but the last were represented on this occasion. This is the fourth successive occasion on which I have been present and regard it as an honour and a rich opportunity to spend several days with the heads of our Partner Churches. The council is a forum for learning about the endeavours of each other's churches, tackling one particular theme together and a limited amount of joint working, most notably in theological education and youth work.

The Pacific covers one third of the earth's surface – therefore the largest continent ('place of habitation') in the world. It has a population of 10.6 million in three broad ethnographic regions, Micronesia, Polynesia and Melanesia. By the beginning of the twentieth century 90% of Pacific Islanders were Christians and this is now central to the identity of all the island states. Despite the number of Christian states and the high profile of Methodism the Pacific has a quiet voice in Christian circles; despite the fact that these islands bear the brunt of the results of the human abuse of the world's resources they also get scant attention in the world media unless there is a really devastating disaster.

The Visit

The topic chosen by the previous meeting of MCCP was the decline in Methodist membership across the region. Broadly speaking, the member churches have all seen a decline in their membership as Methodists have found the new religious groups - Pentecostal/charismatic/fundamentalist - more to their liking. One typical example, in 1966 90% of the population of Tonga was either Methodist, Anglican or Roman Catholic, by 2006 the figure was 63%, the corresponding rise in new religious groups was from 10% to 35%.



In working out a response one major theme was to seek for greater clarity and commitment to the Methodist identity and an awareness of what the Wesleyan tradition still has to offer in 21st century island life. The group's theological colleges have now been asked to prepare papers on this for the next meeting in Tonga in 2017.

The following statement was issued by the meeting.

Methodist Consultative Council of the Pacific

Samoa, 16th April 2015

We, Church leaders from six Pacific countries met in Au Uso Fealofani Hall, Faleula, Samoa from 13-16 April 2015, and following four days of consultation, prayer and worship we return to our home churches today informed, inspired and enriched, taking the love and greetings of our fellow Pacific Christians with us.

A highlight of the meeting was the warm hospitality and friendship offered by our hosts. The women and men of the Methodist Church in Samoa offered us the comfort of the Wesley Motel, wonderful Samoan food and a glimpse of their rich cultural life.

We were inspired to hear of the way God is working through Methodism in the region and in other parts of the worldwide Methodist family. Climate change had been the theme of our previous meeting two years ago and some of our members reported on their efforts since then to learn and change; as a regional council we agreed to share our churches' theological and worship resources on this.

The main topic in this meeting was membership and, with the benefit of recent research and our own experiences, we reflected on the reasons behind growth in some places and decline in others. Council members agreed that showing clarity about a Wesleyan identity is important and that they could work together on being a contemporary, 21st-century church in the tradition of John Wesley. This will be the theme of the Council's next meeting with preparatory work being undertaken by the existing MCCP partnership between the Methodist theological colleges in Samoa, Tonga and Fiji.

Members also re-affirmed the importance of work with the youth and will hold the next regional Youth Event in Samoa in 2016. Issues affecting women were given time in the meeting, scholarships and exchanges are made available to women as well as men, and delegations continue to be encouraged to include women's representatives. We appreciated the presence of the Methodist Church Britain with us but missed the presence of our colleagues from the United Church of the Solomon Islands on this occasion.

We have learned much together to take back to our churches and to incorporate into our thinking, policy and action. We know we in the Pacific have a small voice in the world and need to sing together to be heard and to be effective witnesses for Christ.

*Free Wesleyan Church of Tonga
Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma
Methodist Church New Zealand
Methodist Church Samoa
United Church Papua New Guinea
Uniting Church of Australia
Methodist Church Britain*