

## **Education in the South Pacific \***

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My focus is on Wesley College in the context of Wesleyan education today, how it was placed at the beginnings of the Wesleyan journey in New Zealand and the South Pacific, and how it might be placed in the future.

Wesley College today is a state integrated secondary school with a special character. In essence what that means is that Wesley College is like any other state school in New Zealand – it follows the national curriculum and is managed like any other state school – but it has a recognised special character. That special character is enshrined in the 1976 integration agreement and framed in the language and thinking of New Zealand in the 1970's.

This special character speaks of Wesley College as a Christian, multicultural boarding school with special provisions for the children of Maori, Pacific Island people, orphans and those with social needs. It also speaks of industrial training (which includes agriculture) and religious observances. Additionally the charge is there to provide a place where those from various ethnic groups can receive an education and learn to live together in harmony. The student body today is 57% Maori, 35% of Pacific Islands origin, 5% European, 2% Fijian, with the other 1% being from countries like the Solomon Islands, Botswana and Bolivia. While there have been a few from Asia in past years, none are enrolled this year.

In the early 1840s those working within the Wesleyan Missionary Society in New Zealand focused on at least two matters in relation to education. The first was a concern for their own children. Mission personnel were aware that the level of education they could provide for their children was limited by their own levels of education, and by the overwhelming nature of the demands that were being placed on them by their work. For some, no more than a fairly basic primary school education was possible. Some missionaries were so concerned that there were even suggestions that unless some form of secondary education was provided for their children they would leave New Zealand and return home.

Out of this concern the decision was made at the district meeting held in Fiji in 1847 to establish a proprietary college in Auckland. The proprietors were to be the missionaries themselves who would be shareholders in the institution. The list of those shareholders is an indication of how important this venture was, for it includes the names of those who are regarded as founders of the Wesleyan cause in New Zealand and throughout the South Pacific.

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The Wesley College and Seminary was opened in Queen Street on 1 January 1850 with about 40 pupils, both boys and girls, who came from nearly all the mission stations in New Zealand, from Fiji, and Australia. The principal was Rev. Joseph Horner an English Methodist, whose training for teaching was his own experience at Kingswood School – the English Wesleyan school. Rev. Horner had been sent to Kingswood from St Vincent in the West Indies where his parents were missionaries. The curriculum at Wesley College included English and Roman history, English grammar, geography, higher rules of arithmetic, the rudiments of algebra and Latin, reading and writing. This formed what one missionary described as a good Wesleyan education.

Alongside the move to establish a school to provide a good English education for missionary children another strand also existed in the concern by the Wesleyan missionaries about what was happening to Maori. They were aware of the impact of an invasive culture and sought a means to equip Maori to survive in the new world that was rapidly surrounding them. Rev. Walter Lawry approached Governor Fitzroy for help and a land grant was made on 7 October 1844 to provide for a Wesleyan native institution.

The current Wesley College regards this as its date of foundation and from it, lays claim to being the oldest surviving school in the country. It may be that Richmond Road Primary School in Auckland actually holds this distinction. If this is true, the claim may – need to be modified to a claim to be the oldest surviving secondary school.

It has been said that this school was founded out of a direct social concern that was so much part of John Wesley's emphasis. The school opened under the leadership of Rev. Thomas Buddle, with some 10 students from as far afield as the Hokianga and Kawhia. These were men, rather than boys – some were married – selected because they had shown promise as leaders. Rev. Buddle taught the Bible and theology and his assistant, Rev. H.H. Lawry, taught English, writing and arithmetic. The students had lessons in the mornings and evenings, and each afternoon they worked in the garden.

In succeeding years the Grafton site became too small. Additional grants were made of land at Three Kings and the school moved there. The fortunes of the school at Three Kings waxed and waned. Towards the middle of the 1850s when tensions were high within New Zealand as a result of land disputes, the roll fell dramatically. In an effort to keep numbers up some orphans and destitute children were enrolled at the expense of the Provincial government. There was also a grant of further land to assist with their maintenance. So another aspect was added to the school's character to form the beginnings of what we now know as the special character.

The Wesley College mat is one that is incomplete. The future holds much excitement as well as tension. A significant question is how to interpret the intention of the weavers of that special character as we move into the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Another is how is industrial education to be applied in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? What does it mean? Does it really mean life skills in the context of this time, or should it be more narrowly interpreted as horticulture and crop growing?

A helpful statement about how we might place ourselves was made by former Chaplain, Rev. Bill Chessum, at our 160<sup>th</sup> celebration chapel service in 2005.

*The life of Wesley now entering our 17<sup>th</sup> decade, needs to continue identifying those young people who can benefit from being welcomed into the strong bonds of the college. In an age which talks of a level playing field and of equal opportunity we still believe in a God who is a person, who can and will show bias, a bias towards the disadvantaged and the dispossessed, those who need support even to get on the level playing field.*

Rev. Sylvia 'Akau'ola Tongotongo has spoken about how some young people in the Tongan context see their church in New Zealand. Those matters Sylvia mentioned have a sharp focus at Wesley regardless of the ethnic group with which each individual might identify. The issues of culture, identity and relationships form the heart of a 21<sup>st</sup> century special character. My view would be that the special character, while holding to its base, must continue to be interpreted for the situation in which the college finds itself.

Another, more recently established integrated school with a distinctive Christian focus, has its special character written so that it will be expressed in exactly the same way in 100 years. That was the intention of the proprietors. I am sure that was not the wish of those who framed the ideals that are now reflected at Wesley College.

To conclude with some further words from Bill Chessum:

*So, the ongoing life of Wesley must continue to reflect these principles:*

*Strong historic faith;*

*Directed motivation to be inclusive, open to all with special needs;*

*Firm grounding in the life of the common people.*

*In these ways we will remain true to our founders, true to that original Wesley whose name we bear, and true to the spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in himself expressed the very essence of God the creator, active in the world He created, living, dying and rising, that it might be saved and restored.*

To that sentiment and challenge I can only echo Bill Chessum's final word: Amen.