

David Poultney. **PLENA.** *Becoming more vile. The possibilities of a strategy of intentional displacement for Methodist missions.*

In 2012 I undertook an extended essay as a post-graduate student at the University of Otago. The topic I chose to explore was one which emerged out of my particular context as superintendent presbyter for a parish which has a historically close and engaged relationship with a Methodist Mission, in fact like my recent predecessors I am chair of the board of governors of this Mission; which undertakes a range of social services in the centre of the North Island of New Zealand. What I found when I came into this role was that there was a substantial disconnection between parish and mission and, when I researched this I found we were not alone. The same estrangement was being repeated in mainstream Protestant denominations around the developed world.

There are a range of factors involved, these include “a perceived trend towards professionalization, secularisation and corporatisation of the Church’s social services.”<sup>1</sup> Also as the advocacy side of our missions’ work has led to a greater engagement in social and political issues and attempts to address the causes rather than the symptoms of inequality this has led to a diminished possibility of engagement by lay people and parish clergy in opportunities to offer practical support in ways which give direct benefit to people in need and provide some sense of emotional satisfaction, of having done good. David Bromwell, who was superintendent of the Methodist Mission in Christchurch, wrote;

Missions are essentially saying farewell to a long tradition of Christian “charity.” That is a process and it involves acknowledging and grieving the demise of a certain “feel good” factor in much Christian social services.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David J. Bromwell, “Christian Faith and Social Services,” (Unpublished paper, November 2002), 1.

<sup>2</sup> David J. Bromwell, “Social Development: Beyond the Rhetoric.” Paper presented to the International Community Development Conference, Rotorua, New Zealand, April, 2001.

Historically speaking our missions were associated with specific congregations, our missionaries served as presbyters to these congregations and there pioneered forms of evangelical outreach which went alongside social service programmes, these caught the imagination and nurtured the enthusiasm of New Zealand Methodists;<sup>3</sup> this connection had effectively come to an end and negatively impacted on the visibility of our missions and their place in the affection and enthusiasm of Methodists.

Whatever the reasons a growing estrangement between the churches and the agencies undertake social services and community development in their name is problematic; particularly so for Methodist Churches.”<sup>4</sup> Mission has been part of the ethos of Methodism from its beginning and this is something of a defining mark of its identity.

Methodists are well known for a commitment to mission in the community, and to social justice. That includes speaking out on what is seen as unjust social policy or delivery, or in the impact of prevailing values and practices. Methodists are often forerunners in these areas. Methodists have established a reputation also for keeping together evangelism and mission, spirituality and action, word and deed – often separated in the emphases of other Christian groups.<sup>5</sup>

In my essay I sought to explore the possibility of re-vitalizing that relationship through saying what goes unsaid; by exploring the theological premises and principles implicit to the practice of social work and community development by Methodist Missions in New Zealand. In acknowledging that something is going unsaid I was making the point that part of the problem in the current disengagement of parish and mission is the lack of doing theology and of speaking theologically by the missions in ways which are resonant with regular

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<sup>3</sup> Donald Phillips, *Mission in a Secular City. Methodist Mission Northern 1851-2001.* (Auckland: Methodist Mission Northern, 2001), 133.

<sup>4</sup> David C. Poultney, “What Goes Unsaid The Search for Reconnection Between Methodist Missions & Parishes, Drawing on the Past & Present of Mission in Auckland,” (Post Grad Dip Extended Essay for Otago University, 2012), 1.

<sup>5</sup> John Salmon, “Theology and Methodist Mission,” Paper presented at the Hope, Humility and Justice: Practicing Community Development in Aotearoa in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Conference, Auckland, New Zealand, 15 April 2005,

ordinary Methodists. Rieger writes that there is a debilitating tension in the churches between;

Those who focus on the socio-ethical implications of Christian existence and emphasize orthopraxis ... including a strong focus on what Christians can do for others. On the other side are those who focus on things they consider more spiritual, such as issues of Christian identity and the divine mystery.<sup>6</sup>

The missions tend heavily towards orthopraxis, to emphasising right or just action, in ways which can be distant from ordinary Methodists. This touches on a disconnect in our church life. Sometimes our denominational leadership, including those with governance or managerial responsibility for our missions, assume certain values around social justice as a given and then find that this isn't so.<sup>7</sup> The disconnect between parishes and missions cannot be held to be entirely the responsibility of the parishes, it behoves the missions to find ways of talking about practice, experience and situation which are theologically resonant with the people called Methodist.

To explore the possibility of this I looked at the history of one particular mission; that based in Auckland to tell particular stories from its life from the early nineteenth century to the present day. I then looked at two particular biblical narratives used extensively by Methodists and other Christians in reflecting upon the practice of Mission; the parable of the Good Samaritan and the parable of the Sheep and Goats. The research I did on these texts and how they are used led me to conclude that;

They carry within them a particular dynamic that would lead towards an incarnational theological understanding of Mission in that they both have the power

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<sup>6</sup> Joerg Rieger, "Between God and the Poor: Rethinking the Means of Grace in the Wesleyan Tradition." In *The Poor and the People Called Methodists 1729-1999*, ed Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville / TN: Kingswood Books, 2002), 80

<sup>7</sup> Heidi Unruh, Jill Sinha and John Belcher, "Mainline Protestant Strategies to Maintain Connections Between Faith Communities and Their Nonprofits: Findings from the Faith and Organizations Project." Paper written for the Faith and Organizations Project. University of Maryland, Baltimore, 2010, 4.

to encourage the reinvention of community and the nurturing of a sense of awareness and ethical responsibility towards marginalised and suffering people among whom God is present and with whom God suffers.<sup>8</sup>

This led me to conclude my essay with a reflection on incarnation as a theological motif; in doing so I identified three rationales. There is an increasingly marked as a motif in New Zealand Methodism as there is shift from an inherited European theology in which salvation is generally understood to come to us as individuals to a Maori and Pacific perspective which sees salvation as experienced as the work of redemption in community and with that a more positive appreciation of the world. More widely incarnationality is being re-discovered as a theological motif by Protestant theologians and this is most apparent in Protestant theology of Mission and is evidence of the influence of Liberation Theology; where Mission is viewed in terms of

the incarnate Christ, the human Jesus of Nazareth who wearily trod the dusty roads of Palestine where he took compassion on those who were marginalized ... in this model one is not interested in the Christ who offers only eternal salvation, but in a Christ who agonizes and sweats and bleeds with the victims of oppression.<sup>9</sup>

Finally I was compelled towards an incarnational understanding by the very nature of our humanity and the significance of the web of interconnectedness that every person is part of. Something that Daniel Migliore describes as iconic in nature as it shows us God's own self.

The existence of human creatures in relationship reflects the life of God who eternally lives not in solitary existence but in communion. Thus the image of God expresses self-transcending relationship with others, with the 'wholly other' we call

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<sup>8</sup> Poultney, "What Goes Unsaid," 48.

<sup>9</sup> David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll / NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 512.

God, and with all those different ‘others’ who need our help and whose help we also need to be the human creatures God intends us to be.<sup>10</sup>

With an elaboration of this theme my essay ended and I felt relatively content with it; I was encouraged by my supervisor to think about taking it further and deeper, yet there was something missing. Though the essay was complete my answer felt incomplete and that led me to new thinking on the possibility of renewing the connection between parish and mission; if there is a further and deeper it is in this further reflection. While I had presented a coherent theological understanding of contemporary Methodist mission in a New Zealand context I felt there was a lack of connection to traditional Methodist language and motifs and I wondered if finding language to do the theology of mission in and to talk about the work of our missions that had a specifically Methodist texture might be a way forward.

This was not because I wanted to dress up the reality of mission today in some sort of cosy Methodist churchy-speak. It was because the work of our missions today – even if it seems different from the familiar charity based outreach – has to be presented and interpreted in continuity with the long history of Methodist social outreach; a continuity Angela Shier-Jones described well;

Methodist missiology is best understood in terms of each generation having the courage to pose and attempt to answer in terms relevant to their own time and situation, the three questions posed at the first Methodist Conference: what to teach, how to teach and what to do?<sup>11</sup>

Those who have enacted Methodist social outreach in every generation have struggled with the question “what to do?” The search for a way of talking about this which is resonant with contemporary New Zealand Methodists led me to explore some motifs from Methodist

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<sup>10</sup>Daniel Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids / MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 140

<sup>11</sup>Angela Shier Jones, *A Work in Progress*. (Peterborough / UK: Epworth Press, 2005), 260.

theology in search of a shared language for parish and mission, this in turn led me to a particular defining moment in John Wesley's ministry. His life and ministry has presented the people called Methodist with a series of iconic moments. From being snatched "as a brand from the burning" as an infant to his final words "the best of all is that God is with us."

My starting point is one such iconic moment, one which came about at the urging of his friend George Whitfield as Wesley struggled with his sensibilities as an Anglican priest and the exigencies of his ministry. Wesley, a devout and conscientious Anglican priest, would have naturally looked upon "the saving of souls as a sin if it had not been done in church."<sup>12</sup> Yet he overcame his sensibility out of a desire to reach as many people as he could people who might never enter a church. Drawing on the example of the Sermon on the Mount,<sup>13</sup> where Jesus is seen preaching in the open air, Wesley "submitted to be more vile and proclaimed in the highways the glad tidings of salvation."<sup>14</sup>

Albert Outler wrote that this decision by Wesley had the effect of moving him "from highly self-conscious words to truly unconscious action. His passion for truth had been transformed into compassion for persons."<sup>15</sup> His decision to embrace open-air preaching has been credited with giving a new energy to this commitment to the poor. "From this

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<sup>12</sup>John Wesley, *The Journal of John Wesley*. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1951) n.p. cited in David Bush "The Innovative Culture and how to promote it in the Methodist Church of New Zealand," Paper presented to The Board of Administration of the Methodist Church of New Zealand, Christchurch, 26 July 2010, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 5:3-7:29.

<sup>14</sup> Wesley, *Journal*, n.p.

<sup>15</sup> Albert Outler, *Theology in The Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville / TN: Texas Tidings, 1975), n.p, cited in John Roberts "John Wesley's Legacy: Weaving a Theology of Mission into the Unfinished Mats," in *Weaving the Unfinished Mats: Wesley's Legacy – Conflict, Confusion and Challenge in the South Pacific*. ed. Peter Lineham (Auckland: Capital Press, 2007), 47.

point on John Wesley engaged in a much wider range of social action in response to the needs and concerns he saw in the world around him.”<sup>16</sup>

It certainly led to great commitment from him, here was a man who earned a considerably amount of money from the many books he had published yet who gave almost every penny away in charity, who even in old age would trudge through the snow to deliver firewood to the poor. We need to take care in drawing on Wesley’s life and writings however, there is always the temptation amongst Methodists engaged with social issues to read Wesley in a hagiographical way which is convenient for our particular agendas. Wesley was not a political or social radical, indeed he has often been characterised as a Tory in his support for the monarchy and the established church,<sup>17</sup> yet he made heroic efforts for the poor but he did not seek to challenge the structures of society.

John Wesley had no wish to change the way in which society is organized – except where luxury at one extreme and poverty at the other stood between God and man. When he spoke of needing new men to build a new world it was Christ’s kingdom, inhabited by his saints which he was offering to his followers. John Wesley believed that virtue must be built within the established order.<sup>18</sup>

We know that even as far back as the Holy Club at Oxford Wesley embraced a rule of life in which works of mercy and care for the poor were as central as the cultivation of prayer and spirituality. Not only were both necessary but they formed a whole; in them was the summation of the law and the prophets through love of God and love of neighbour.<sup>19</sup>

For Wesley engagement with the poor had to be personal, to give money wasn’t enough. It was necessary to visit them and enter into relationship with them.

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<sup>16</sup> Roberts, “John Wesley’s Legacy,” 47.

<sup>17</sup> Randy L. Maddox, “Visit the Poor: John Wesley, the Poor and the Sanctification of Believers.” In *The Poor*, ed Richard P. Heitzenrater, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Roy Hattersley, *John Wesley. A Brand From the Burning*. (London: Abacus Books, 2002), 27.

<sup>19</sup> Maddox, “Visit the Poor,” 98.

One great reason why the rich in general have so little sympathy for the poor is because they so seldom visit them. Hence it is that, according to the common observation, one part of the world does not know what the other suffers. Many of them do not know, because they do not care to know; they keep out of the way of knowing it; and plead their voluntary ignorance as an excuse for their harshness of heart. "Indeed sir" (said a person of large substance), "I am a very compassionate man. But to tell you the truth I do not know anybody in the world that is in want." How did this come to pass? Why he took good care to keep out of their way. And if he fell on them unawares, he passed over to the other side.<sup>20</sup>

Wesley never made any differentiation between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor, even back in his Holy Club days he would visit widows and orphans, who have always been commended to the care of Christians, yet would also visit prisoners who commanded little sympathy. He also explicitly rejected any blaming of the poor for being in poverty. This is evident in an entry in his journal for February 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> 1753.

On Friday and Saturday I visited as many more as I could. I found some in their cells underground, others in their garrets, half-starved both with cold and hunger, added to weakness and pain. But I found not one of them unemployed who was able to crawl about the room. So wickedly, so devilishly false is the common objection "They are poor because they are idle.' If you saw these things with your own eyes, could you lay out money in ornaments and superfluities.<sup>21</sup>

His lack of distinction between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor and his lack of reproach towards the poor for their poverty stand in marked contrast to the moralism that has often marked Methodist mission. Differentiation between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor was often made and, in the case of New Zealand Methodism one example of this was resistance from the Primitive Methodists when New Zealand introduced the old aged pension as this would "encourage the feckless." This differentiation was not finally overcome in the practice of the missions until they were faced with the intense and

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<sup>20</sup> John Wesley, "On Visiting the Sick." In *John Wesley's Sermons*, ed Thomas Jackson (publisher unknown, 1872), np. <http://www.wesley.nnu.edu/wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/> (30 July 2012.)

<sup>21</sup> John Wesley, "February 9-10 1753." In *The Journal of the Rev John Wesley*, vol 4, ed, Nehemiah Curnock (London: Epworth Press, 1960), np. Cited in Donald W. Dayton, "Liberation Theology in the Wesleyan and Holiness Tradition." *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, Vol 26, (1991):10.



widespread hardship of the Great Depression.<sup>22</sup> That the poor are, to some degree, responsible for their poverty was quite explicit to how the mission practiced and remains as a theme in public discourses about poverty, inequality and social cohesion to this day.<sup>23</sup>

Helmut Renders writes that in the ministry of John Wesley we find “a constant reflection which develops the way of salvation as in proximity with the promotion of life.”<sup>24</sup> This was expressed in “a tendency to serve first those who are not served yet.”<sup>25</sup> Or in Wesley’s own words;

The rich, the honourable, the great, we are thoroughly willing (if it be the will of the Lord) to leave to you. Only let us alone with the poor, the vulgar, the base, the outcasts of men. Take also to yourself the saints of the world: but suffer us “to call sinners to repentance;” even the most vile, the most ignorant, the most abandoned, the most fierce and savage of whom we can hear. To those we will go forth in the name of the Lord, desiring nothing, receiving nothing of any man, (save the bread we eat while we are under his roof), and let it be seen whether God has sent us. Only let not your hands, who fear the Lord, be upon us.<sup>26</sup>

It is my contention that Wesley’s engagement with and alongside the poor was marked profoundly by his “becoming more vile.” It challenged notions of respectability, it discomforted respectable opinion in his day and stood in marked contrast to the underlying opinions and moral evaluation evident about the poor in the heyday of nineteenth century Methodist mission. To talk of Methodist mission becoming more vile is not simply to wrap it in a familiar Wesleyan vocabulary, it is to offer a critique of our practice and a challenge to it.

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<sup>22</sup> Laurie Guy, *Shaping Godzone, Public Issues and Church Voices in New Zealand 1840-2000* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2011), 223.

<sup>23</sup> Ganesh Nana, “The Cost of Inequality.” In *Inequality. A New Zealand Crisis*, ed. Max Rashbrooke (Wellington: Bridget Williams Press, 2013), 55-67.

<sup>24</sup> Helmut Renders, “The social soteriology of John Wesley and its communitarian, arminian and public elements: Comments on its development, purpose, inspirations and spirituality,” Paper presented at Duke University, Durham, N.C. <<http://www.divinity.duke.edu/oxford/docs/2007papers/2007-2Renders>> (27 June 2012.)

<sup>25</sup> Renders, “Social soteriology,” n.p.

<sup>26</sup> John Wesley, “The Journal of John Wesley – Vol 11,” (Chicago: Moody Press, 1951), 316, cited in Renders “Social soteriology.” n.p.

Yet we should not see in Wesley's reaching out first to the poor, his becoming more vile, as something oppositional, as confrontational even. Methodists engaged in Mission have embraced confrontation. One of the best known – and most polarizing – figures in the history of Methodist missions in New Zealand is Colin Scrimgeour, who led the Auckland Methodist Mission during the worst of the Great Depression. In 1932 Auckland saw a series of riots by the unemployed and in one of these the fence palings at the Methodist mission were utilised as weapons. Scrimgeour wrote about this episode in *The New Zealand Methodist*;

The State has supplied the Police with high-quality batons and the Church had put into the hands of the unemployed good stout palings to fight with. A fence well lost if it served to remind his church and all others that their place was alongside, the poor, the jobless, the fugitive.<sup>27</sup>

Scrimgeour was in many ways an effective missionary and the positive effects of his ministry were widely appreciated in Auckland.<sup>28</sup> This was particularly noticeable among the poor and unemployed who “held church social programmes and welfare agencies in low regard.”<sup>29</sup>

Yet his radicalism succeeded in alienating him from the Church – which was both theologically and politically more conservative - and made his position untenable.<sup>30</sup>

His successor though – Everill Orr – who served as Missioner from 1933 to 1971 was able to steer the Auckland Mission towards being a visibly modern social service agency yet he did this while appealing to a sense of continuity with the history of the Mission while reminding

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<sup>27</sup> Colin Scrimgeour, “Auckland Riots: An Observer’s Impressions,” *The New Zealand Methodist*, 11 May 1932, 9, cited in L. Edwards, *Scrim: Radio Rebel in Retrospect*, (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971),9, cited in Allan K. Davidson, *Christianity in Aotearoa. A History of Church and Society in New Zealand*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Wellington: Education for Ministry, 2004), 24.

<sup>28</sup> Ian F. Faulkner, *The Decisive Decade. Some aspects of the development and character of the Methodist Central Mission, Auckland 1927-1937*, Christchurch; Methodist Church Board of Administration, 1982), 14.

<sup>29</sup> Poultney, “What Goes Unsaid,” 28.

<sup>30</sup> Phillips, *Secular City*, 61.

the Church about the need for necessary changes to meet the needs of the day.<sup>31</sup> This balance is, I think, necessary for Methodist missions seeking to inculcate in the wider church a sense of ownership about their work. Maintaining that connection is the necessary space in which the work of mission can appeal to the soul of the church and challenge it to faithful action.

To embrace “being more vile” as a strategy for mission is not about deliberately alienating opinion or separating individual radical people at the “cutting edge” from the mainstream of church and society, though perhaps these are both risks with this strategy. Rather it is “a standing against the prevailing perspectives in society for the sake of what is seen as life-giving for people otherwise excluded.”<sup>32</sup> Because there is no hermetic seal between society and church then it follows that these perspectives are present in the church too and need to be challenged there.

The contours of how this would look differ from place to place and from time to time. This is a relatively recent description of how it looks in a New Zealand context.

Recognition of the impact of racism, of the injustices of our history, and of Maori as Tangata Whenua,<sup>33</sup> together with an acknowledgment of cultural diversity and the dynamics of power in society and church is an example of that basic Methodist commitment to community-based mission, social justice and a holistic approach.<sup>34</sup>

That was written in 2005, at a time of strong economic growth. Since then New Zealand has not been spared in the global economic downturn and, if I were seeking to update this description then I would want to explicitly include issues of economic justice around the impact of globalisation and economic inequality.

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<sup>31</sup> Poultney, “What Goes Unsaid,” 32.

<sup>32</sup> Salmon, “Theology and Methodist Mission,” 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Te reo Maori* for ‘people of the land’ or indigenous people.

<sup>34</sup> Salmon, “Theology and Methodist Mission,” 1.

An example of a New Zealand Methodist Mission engaging in a strategy of becoming more vile is provided by the Wellington based Wesley Community Action's work with gangs; specifically the Mongrel Mob and Black Power. The New Zealand gangs date back to the 50s and 60s with the difficulties experienced by Maori, who had been largely rural, as they became urbanised and with the advent of immigration into New Zealand from the Pacific Islands.<sup>35</sup> In both cases – Maori and *Pasifika* – there was comparative economic disadvantage and a concurrent comparatively high representation amongst criminal offenders. Both Maori and *Pasifika* have lagged behind *Pakeha* – or New Zealanders of European descent – and more recent immigrants from Asia in terms of employment, income, education and health; this has contributed to a multiple marginality and a sense for some Maori and *Pasifika* that they have little or no stake in society and, if there is such a thing as the New Zealand dream, then it is one which seems to exclude them.<sup>36</sup>

For some young men this sense of alienation has led to involvement in gangs, who though they have a strong code that code is often almost a reversal of societal norms. Bruno Isaac, a member of the Mongrel Mob in the 1980s described gang life as almost the abjuration of morality and of societal norms.

If it was considered evil, bad or lawless we embraced it as good: everything was backward or ironic. The “mystery” of the gang was that we were right even if we were wrong; we were good even if we were bad. We embraced a living contradiction. The Mob psyche may have made no sense to outsiders but everything made perfect sense to us. Being a Mongrel meant being able to do anything your mind could conceive; any form of fantasy or debauchery you could dream up was acceptable.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Jarrod Gilbert, *Patched. The History of the Gangs in New Zealand*, (Auckland; Auckland University Press 2013), 41.

<sup>36</sup> Gilbert, *Patched*, 43-49.

<sup>37</sup> Cited in Gilbert, *Patched*, 41-42.

The gangs have been associated with a range of crime from tagging through to prostitution, home invasion and the drug trade. It is hardly surprising then that they invoke a strong negative reaction amongst many New Zealanders and they invariable feature in any party political platform that stresses getting tough on crime.

With this in mind it might seem surprising that a Methodist social services agency enters into a relationship with two gangs. Where such an agency might cross paths with a gang is in dealing with the fallout; with those who have fallen victim to a lifestyle marked by drug and alcohol abuse, with women and children in often chaotic and violent domestic situations, in court advocacy and prison visiting. Wesley Community Action has done something else; it has heard and responded to a sense of unease amongst some in the leadership of local chapters of two gangs.

This development was “originally unplanned and unforeseen.”<sup>38</sup> It was created through the relationships Wesley Community Action had through its work with Notorious Mongrel Mob and Black Power Wellington. These initial contacts showed older men in both groups had come to see the impact of their lives on their families through drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and broken relationships, the impact of long periods of imprisonment. The turf warfare between the different gangs; most keenly fought between the Mongrel Mob and Black Power. This was the hard reality of the life to which their “prospects” – the inductees to the gangs – were being initiated. It was also the life world their own children

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<sup>38</sup> Wesley Community Action, “An Evaluation. Relationships that Enhance Pro-social Behaviour in ‘Hard to Reach’ Communities. Developing long-term sustainable working relationships with leaders of Notorious Mongrel Mob, Black Power Wellington and Wesley Community Action, to provide positive development opportunities for their whanau and rangitahi,” Unpublished paper (June 2009): 6.

were born in to and something that would inhibit them ever participating fully in the mainstream of New Zealand society.<sup>39</sup>

*Te Puni Kokiri* – The Ministry for Maori Affairs - classes gang members as being a “hard to reach” community. That is to say they experience the most pronounced degree of social exclusion experienced by any part of New Zealand society and are effectively excluded from some of the rights and privileges of citizenship. This includes meaningful participation in education and adequate recourse to public health services as well as the more direct implications of criminality. This hard to reach quality makes gang members a closed community and any change has to come from the internal processes of that community rather than being imposed from outside.<sup>40</sup> It was precisely when older members of the gangs came to see the cost on their community and judge it to be too high that Wesley Community Action was able to facilitate some positive changes.

Out of this engagement between these gangs and Wesley Community Action some useful small scale projects have merged which have led to reduced violence between them, to a less harmful relationship to alcohol and drugs, and to a reduction in domestic violence.<sup>41</sup> People on the margins have been able to make more positive choices to live more constructively. Yet this relationship, which Wesley Community Action entered in to consciously and with limited expectations,<sup>42</sup> was looked upon negatively by some in the Church. To the point where the trustees of a Methodist camp site and outdoor activity centre refused to accept a booking for an event involving Wesley Community Action and one of the gangs because of the possibility of adverse publicity.

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<sup>39</sup> Stan Coster, Tracey McIntosh, Ian Lambie, “The state as parent and warden: Stan’s story.” In *Inequality*, ed Max Rashbrooke, 132-33.

<sup>40</sup> Wesley Community Action. *Relationships that Enhance*, 5.

<sup>41</sup> Wesley Community Action, *Relationships that Enhance*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Paul Titus, “*Methodist Mission reaches out to the Mongrel Mob*,” Touchstone, May 2006, 1.

Less controversially the social service agencies of the Methodist Church of New Zealand are presently taking a leading role in helping parishes formulate their responses to a 10 year church initiative called “Let the Children Live.” New Zealanders have long prided ourselves that ours is a great country to bring up children yet the truth is somewhat less comforting and gives us no cause for self-congratulation. Our rate of childhood deaths from violence is one of the highest in the OECD.<sup>43</sup> The children who are most at risk are Maori who, though Maori are some 15% of the population, over 50% of childhood deaths from violence are amongst Maori children. There are numerous factors involved including a well-established link between poorer communities and higher levels of all forms of domestic violence. There is also a wealth of evidence that this form of violence is statistically high in other indigenous communities that have suffered the displacement of colonialism.

Public discourse around the violent death of children tends to present it as “their” problem, as reflecting some flaw in Maori culture. This serves to keep it at arms’ length, it is all very sad but nothing to do with us.

Added to this there are pockets of high density low grade housing most noticeable in south Auckland where Maori and Pasifika children in poor housing and in families with low incomes suffer much worse health than their contemporaries.<sup>44</sup> Again public discourse tends to distance poor children from ‘mainstream’ experience and expectations. It is about them – *Pasifika*, Maori, the poor and their dysfunction.

Poverty in general impacts upon children heavily and with this there are issues about housing, health and food security. The missions are asking themselves how their work might benefit children in poorer families and their parents or carers and this is proving to be a

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<sup>43</sup> UNICEF New Zealand and the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, *Protecting Children from Abuse and Neglect. Information and Check points for organizations working with children and families*. (Wellington: Office of the Commissioner for Children, 2004), np.

<sup>44</sup> Cathy Wylie, “Schools and Inequality.” In *Inequality*, ed Max Rashbrooke, 134-142.

relatively accessible issue for parishes in that it feels quite traditional, it has echoes of a familiar form of charity.

The last aspect of the Let the Children Live campaign isn't fully launched yet and I suspect for some of our churches more than for society at large will prove to be the most difficult. It raises the issue of youth suicide and two of the strongest indicators of risk for suicidal behaviour by young people is a Gay or Lesbian sexual orientation or Gender Dysphoria.<sup>45</sup> Some of our churches, in fact those churches with the largest proportion of young people, are home to congregations of Samoan, Tongan or Fijian Methodists where culturally there are strong taboos around discussing sex and sexuality and where resistance to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered participation in all levels of church and national life is at its strongest. So how will this issue be addressed and how will the missions take a lead? One can imagine activity amongst liberal or progressive congregations with few if any young people while the youngest part of our church remains silent in the issue. It also might simply not be actioned, and there is a history of church based social service agencies developing programmes around issues on which there is a consensus and of avoiding issues around which church members are divided.<sup>46</sup>

What, we might ask would be an authentic Wesleyan response? I believe it would be to tell the difficult truth, to do the discomfoting thing and challenge both society and ourselves in doing so. Just as I believe it was right for Wesley Community Action to pursue a plan of engagement with the gangs.

Methodism has always held that 'true religion' is marked by the sense and practice of compassion and that the imperative of compassion requires a commitment to working

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<sup>45</sup> GayNZ "The facts about LGBT youth suicide." Accessed on line at <[http://www.gaynz.com/articles/publish/33/article\\_5008](http://www.gaynz.com/articles/publish/33/article_5008)> (23/07/13.)

<sup>46</sup> Unruh, Sinha & Belcher, "Mainline Protestant Strategies," 4.



alongside those in need.<sup>47</sup> It is the Methodist Missions that have been entrusted with this work on behalf of the Church. To look to how being more vile can be enacted in this work carries real possibilities for us.

A strategy of being more vile is to embrace a way which holds the possibility of binding together the quest for a deeper spiritual vitality as individuals and congregations with the imperative of social holiness.<sup>48</sup> If that connection were to be finally severed it would be a blow to the integrity of the church and the authenticity of its witness.

To lose the perspective of Mission, personal and social holiness, evangelism, care for all that God has made, standing against injustice and living on a global map is to lose who we are, to lose our memory and to lose our reason for being under God.<sup>49</sup>

As yet these are early days does this line of enquiry, but I think there is the possibility here of a way of doing theology about mission that is authentically Wesleyan and carries the possibility of renewed connection between Methodist parishes and those who enact mission in their name.

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<sup>47</sup> James Stuart, *The John Wesley Code. Finding a Faith that Matters* (Wellington: Phillip Garside Publishing, 2008), 92-107.

<sup>48</sup> Dion Forster, "Prophetic witness and social action as holiness in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa's mission," *Studiae Historiae Ecclesiasticae* Vol XXXIV (July 2008):1-16.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Atkins, "Reimagining Future Missions Together," *Epworth Review* (January 2011), 14  
<<http://www.methodist.org.uk/media/516003/epworth-review-martin-atkins-0111.pdf>> (15 October 2012.)

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