

THE CHURCHES AND THE TREATY OF WAITANGI

Brief: half an hour and time for questions.

fourth in series after

Maryanne Haggie - Pakeha perspective on
Steph Knight - Treaty and Race Relations
local Maori lawyer - Treaty and justice system

who I think the audience is

I'm assuming that you are a mixture of people, some of you identify as church members, some of you have distant church connections, and some of you are from outside and don't know any inside stuff. So I'm trying to make this talk something that all of you can get something out of, without having to know heaps of fine-tuning details.

This is the sort of topic people write books about - probably fairly boring books.... but still, in less than an hour I'm going to leave some fairly big gaps! So, prepare for some pretty sweeping generalisations. I hope you'll be able to tell when I'm stating facts and when I'm interpreting or giving my opinion.

What do I mean by the churches and who do I talk about best

When we hear the word "church" or "churches", we all understand different things. I can think of several different ways I myself use the words.

There has always been a tension in Christian discussions between the church as institution, and the church as a bunch of Christians in a local context: an organism with a spiritual, organic life.

At least since the Reformation, there has been a tension between the denominational churches, with their different traditions, histories and emphases, and the Church with a capital letter as the sum total of Christian life and activity.

And within each denomination there is something of a range or spectrum among memberships - conservative/adventurous, traditional/modernist, relating to bible and liturgy as unchanging/ experiencing the bible and liturgy as living, changing with the experience of the people of God.

Some churches have always defined other churches as inside or outside - heretical, lacking in something which they consider basic or adding too much that they consider unchristian.

The late 19th century saw the start of the ecumenical movement, which began to take organisational form during the first half of this century. This brought together many of the so-called "mainstream" denominations, over against the large Roman Catholic church and the Orthodox churches. The "mainstream" churches, or those in ecumenical structures, vary somewhat from country to country. Denominations may have been excluded because they were considered heretical by the others, or because they considered the others heretical.

In this country, the "mainstream" in NCC would have been Anglican, Baptist, Church of Christ, Congregational, Methodist, Presbyterian, Salvation Army and Society of Friends. When the NCC dissolved, and the Conference of Churches in Aotearoa-New Zealand was formed a couple of years ago, the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox were part of that process. The Baptists decided not to continue, but the Lutherans decided to join.

Large churches which have never been part of mainstream ecumenical structures include the Mormons, Assemblies of God, Seventh Day Adventists and Brethren groupings. Ringatu, Ratana and other Maori Christian churches were not included, nor were Unitarians.

While I personally understand the church to be manifest in the form of groups of Christians expressing their faith in community, I also reckon with the churches as institution(s). In my work I have acquired most information about the denominations which work together ecumenically, both their work together and their denominational activities. I think that what is said at/by major significant gatherings of churches - assemblies, conferences, synods and so forth - as policy or agreed direction or action, is solid social data. So that's what I'll mostly talk about.

Treaty signing history

The churches were heavily involved in the events leading up to and surrounding the signing of the Treaty. In Britain they had played a major part in the campaign for the abolition of the slave trade, and so were part of an extensive political humanitarian lobby. This carried over through the evangelical movement into missionary activity.

The Anglican and Wesleyan missionaries in New Zealand were opposed to colonisation, but they were for control of the lawless British who began to accumulate. They were involved with Busby in the 1835 Declaration of Independence (they translated it).

The French Catholic missionaries in the Pacific put the wind up the Anglicans and Wesleyans. The French were also seen as a rival colonial threat. As the Wakefields prepared to colonise willy nilly, the missionaries and the missionary (Maori) church began

to call for British intervention. Their influence in turn helped to shift the position of the British churches, and the humanitarian lobby, towards colonisation and control, especially of the New Zealand Company.

It's a fact that missions have historically been inextricably entwined with the process of colonisation.

They helped to gather the Maori people to meet Hobson at Waitangi. They discussed the Treaty with the Maori Christians. They (Henry Williams) translated the draft Treaty into Maori. Bishop Pompallier was instrumental in getting the fourth clause or protocol on religious freedom and customs included. Missionaries advised Maori to sign, Maori close to the missions were the first signatories, and missionaries collected further signatures.

And today, eg in the church leaders statement, the ecumenical churches acknowledge that as part of their collective history.

other history

As settlers began to flood into the country, the churches began to change. The church formed by the missionaries and Maori together was not the church which the Christian settlers expected and needed. One institutional example can be taken: the Anglicans. The Anglican church developed between 1823 and 1840 as a missionary church with mostly Maori membership and operating in the Maori language. In 1842 Bishop Selwyn arrived as first bishop of New Zealand. The ministry to Anglican settlers had begun. In 1857 Selwyn convened a Constituent Assembly which drew up and signed a Constitution with no Maori Christians present at all. Separation had begun.

As the settler breaches of the Treaty became more gross and more frequent, some voices in the churches, particularly on the missionary side, were raised in protest. Letters were written, sermons were preached. Political decisions made by the settler government were opposed via the church lobby in Britain.

But the settler churches, particularly the later arrivals, knew little about the Treaty. As the disputes over land and rangatiratanga sharpened into warfare, Pakeha priests and missionaries were compromised. Catholic priests were withdrawn from Maori work, to meet the needs of poor Catholics recruited from British urban poor as militia. Missionaries who remained in Maori situations, wittingly or unwittingly acted as sources of military information. By the 1880s the gulfs and barriers were enormous.

The Maori people came to be regarded as a "mission field", as distant as "Greenland's icy mountains or India's coral strand". The churches' literature of the times is paternalistic and

patronising, and does not really sound as though Maori Christians are thought of as "real Christians like us".

The rise of the Ratana church in the 1920s, with its focus on the Treaty of Waitangi, was a challenge to the Pakeha churches, but a challenge which they were slow to pick up.

Maori divisions, autonomy, challenges 1960s

Most of the churches had "Maori missions", and they had many of the marks of paternalism. They were under-resourced. The Pakeha people deployed there were often of institutionally low standing, although frequently of high abilities. (Deaconesses). They were marginal rather than central in church structures - for example they were usually spoken for in assemblies by Pakeha men. They had little autonomy, and dependent budgets. The appointment of Maori leadership tended to be controlled and screened by Pakeha men.

During the 1950s, 60s, and 70s, the international ecumenical movement was influenced by decolonisation struggles and debates, as black and third world Christians began to question the structural power relationships of society which were also manifest in the churches. Some New Zealand church people, including Maori, participated in events which encouraged them to articulate some of their own perceptions and experiences. Questions of autonomy, paternalism, decolonisation, began to be explored in a newly developing theological vocabulary which was rooted in the bible, but in turn the bible was read with new vision.

The late 1960s and 1970s saw the Treaty being brought into new forums, by such groups as Nga Tamatoa. Small parts of the churches were quite quick to hear and respond, including the Maori parts of the churches.

1980s

In this past decade, some significant changes have occurred within the churches, as they have in society generally. These have not, as yet, substantially affected the outcomes or the position of Maori people as a group. Nevertheless, under a number of influences, in which I would rank the Treaty of Waitangi as highly significant, changes have occurred.

1) A movement towards autonomy for Maori in mainstream churches, with a view to mutual rather than paternalist-dependent relationships. Examples: The "Maori Section" of the old NCC became Te Runanga Whakawhanaunga i Nga Hahi o Aotearoa. The mana and influence of the Methodist Maori Division rose steadily. The Anglican Maori bishop was selected by Maori instead of by the other (Pakeha) bishops and had an independent bishopric. etc

2) A movement of increasing awareness among the Pakeha: a movement of education and conscientisation.

3) This in turn and in parallel has led to changes of intention, direction, policy and even some action in the whole organisation.

Examples.

The Methodist church rediscovered its historical relationship to the Treaty, not just the missionaries but their 1940-42 Conference resolutions about the Treaty. They began to discuss power sharing, and resolved to become a bicultural church. Their bicultural journey has been both about education and about changing their processes. For example: Council of Elders, and Land Commission which requires research into the provenance of any piece of land which Methodists intend to sell, and encourages all parishes to research their land, right back to Crown grant and beyond.

The Anglican church set up a bicultural Commission on the Treaty, and has begun to amend its constitution in search of a bicultural structure. They have returned some land to tangata whenua. They have a lot o hassles to untangle, because of having been so close to the Governors while reserve lands were being handed around.

The Quakers have reached a common mind about the centrality of the Treaty of Waitangi, and have begun to look for particular ways in which they, as a small, Pakeha denomination, can contribute to changes which will bring about peace and justice.

The Mission Sisters are an example of a Catholic order who are currently researching in detail all the land which they own or use.

What of the more conservative, evangelical or charismatic churches? They are responding to the Treaty according to their own lights. Because the individual's relationship to Jesus is paramount in some of these traditions, at this stage they simply "do not compute" collective, social, political ideas. So from this direction much of the emphasis is on inter-personal relations, forgiveness and reconciliation.

This is not my own tradition, but it is one which I respect. I know it to be at its best firmly rooted in the bible, which I believe to be a justice-oriented document, whose power can move people. And I know that the Treaty has come into their frame of reference. For example, the Journal of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship, February 1989, "The Treaty of Waitangi: Pakeha face the issues".

1990

1990 has brought a joint statement on the centrality of the Treaty by leaders of most of the churches in the Conference.

Many within the churches, and most of the churches, are still committed to exploring questions raised by the dynamic between the gospel and the Treaty: questions about culture, resources, decision-making, partnership, equality, love, faith and life.

It's a horrifying thought, but I fear the Crown may have peaked. If what we are seeing, and I suspect we are, is the government's political embarrassment and distancing from the Treaty, the future of Aotearoa will depend increasingly on implementation of the Treaty, by trial and error, in local settings, by all sorts of people. We will have to resist the news that the "fashion" is over, and we can all give up - the media may orchestrate popular disenchantment, or give everybody the impression that the struggle is over, the victory won, and we can all relax and go home for a nice sleep. After all, we've recently been given the impression that Maori people now own all the fish, and coal and have been given back half the South Island ... and are now lolling around building fancy waka out of the profits, when the grim fact is that multinationals are buying our assets as fast as you can say corporatisation and privatisation, and I don't notice the Muriwhenua people feasting on fish.

As a christian I claim the right to sling off at the churches from time to time, to get angry and frustrated with them, to struggle with the unpalatable knowledge that they are as flawed as any other human institution.

But I also claim the right to a spark of hope, even a small flame. Like ocean liners, churches are hard to start, and hard to turn around, but they are also hard to stop. The churches could be one of the places where people hold on to their vision and to commitment to the Treaty. One of the places.

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