

Editorial: Melanesians with Current Concerns

David Vincent, guest editor

The main articles in this issue each deal with a topic of current concern to the churches. It is also noteworthy that all of the writers (except the final one) are Melanesians, and that several of them wrestle with the issues, specifically in relation to their own cultural traditions. These, then, are some positive examples of an emerging contextual theology. At the time of their writing, the authors each belonged to the community of Rarongo Theological College, near Rabaul, and thus reflect much of the present thinking of the United church in Papua New Guinea.

Howard Dian opens our discussion with an evaluation of a Pentecostal “revival” movement within one circuit of the United church. This movement has created a considerable amount of confusion and division within the church, but Dian’s analysis brings out some positive aspects of the “revival”, as well as indicating the problems that it has caused. He recognises that a failure in Christian teaching and nurture has left church members open to influence by the movement, and recommends that the circuit respond creatively to the challenge of this “revival”.

The next three articles follow naturally from Dian’s discussion, in that they each elaborate upon an issue, which is commonly raised by such renewal movements (although that fact is not their own starting point, nor their immediate concern). All three of these writers give particular consideration to the relevant Melanesian cultural background of their topics, and so provide new perspective for theological reflection.

Ignatius Ketobwau describes the confusion, which exists in the minds of Trobriand Islanders, in relating the Christian teaching of heaven to their traditional belief of paradise, *Tuma*. He suggests that this difficulty was created by the early missionaries' lack of appreciation for traditional culture and beliefs. Ketobwau argues that a truly omnipresent God should be understood as being also in *Tuma*, and, indeed, that such an interpretation is required by a proper understanding of the incarnation. Christ should be seen as a Trobriand Islander, who completely understands the values and aspirations of these communities, and is, thus, able to lead them most fully into salvation, and eternal life.

William Amo gives a vivid description of traditional healing in the Duke of York Islands, and explains both the natural, and the spiritual, aspects of this. He argues that such practices should be understood as gifts of God, empowered by His Spirit, and that, when transformed in this way, they should be accepted as a part of the church's pastoral ministry. He believes that this provides an important means of contextualising Christian faith and experience in the lives of Melanesians.

Taumata Hobart explores the way in which Melanesian Christians understand the sacrament of baptism. Interviews, which he conducted, highlight the concern that baptism is seen as a means of protection, with only a lesser emphasis upon a theological, or ecclesiological, understanding. By describing traditional rites of initiation (both at birth, and at the transition to adulthood), Hobart shows the cultural background to this view of baptism, and is also able to draw out some similarities in meaning between traditional and Christian initiation. He then suggests how these insights could be helpfully developed in the church's teaching.

The following article by Mark Neapila brings an assessment of peace initiatives for Bougainville. Neapila is, himself, from that trouble-torn island, and has been living there during part of the present

crisis. He describes the main attempts, which have been made to address the issues, and analyses, both their approaches to peace making, and also the reasons for their failure. He also assesses the involvement of the churches, and outlines a biblical understanding of peace, and peace making, which would provide a new way forward, through forgiveness and justice. Neapila's article is a serious and positive contribution to this major national issue.

Mission theology is the concern of Vasi Gadiki's contribution, here. He begins with a review of missionary thinking, indicating the more-recent development of contextual issues. This leads to consideration of mission in the Bible, and a review of the United church's present mission emphasis.

Church administration is probably not the most obvious, nor the most popular, topic for a theological journal, but Lobia Auela's short article is both insightful and helpful. Drawing on his experience in the public service, Auela identifies, and describes, common weaknesses in planning, and in stewardship, indicating their causes, and suggesting possible solutions.

The final article in the issue is something of an "in-house" concern of theological colleges, with a discussion of curriculum. But a wider readership also may well be interested to know how one such institution continues to develop the way, in which it prepares people for ministry in the church.