



Vol 33, Issue 1-2

2017

MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

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REPORT ON MATS 2017

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Although Jesus himself came from the small town of Nazareth and spent most of his ministry in Galilee, Christianity itself started in Jerusalem, and after the destruction of that city by Roman armies in AD 70, the focus shifted to the Christian communities that were already flourishing in the major centres of the empire such as Antioch, Alexandria, Rome, Carthage and, later, Constantinople. Quite simply, these towns were already centres of travel and communication, and they became natural foci for the networking and the exchange of ideas and personnel that were part of the growth of God's church.

It seems that MATS is following the same pattern. The 2016 conference was held in Popondetta and, therefore, apart from those living in the capital, people needed to make at least two flights to get there—and it was not easy to secure a seat on a plane that was actually flying. The low numbers and the late start are a reminder to us that extra efforts must be made if we hold conferences in places where the geography poses a challenge. But the warm welcome – a true Oro welcome – demonstrates that the remote parts want to have their part in the life of the church, and that includes its theological life. Good theology grows out of a dialogue between the centres and the margins.

The 2017 conference, held at the Catholic Theological Institute, Bomana, had the advantage of a central location. There were about 37 academics in attendance, representing ten local institutions including, for the first time, Rarongo Theological College, as well as about ten clergy – Catholic priests and Adventist pastors – from around Port Moresby; a large number of students from CTI attended the sessions as well. The larger number of attendees also meant that we had a full programme of presentations.

The conference theme – one of four possibilities proposed by those at the Popondetta – was Church and Politics. The keynote speaker was Dr. Andrew Murray, a Marist priest and philosopher based in Sydney. Dr. Murray's interest in the South Pacific, and particularly its political life, has led him to use the categories of the philosopher Aristotle to describe and

analyse our own experiences of political life in his most recent book, *Thinking about Political Things: An Aristotelian Approach to Pacific Life*. He gave a talk on each morning of the conference. On the first two mornings he led us in thinking about what political life is, for instance, how the state is like or unlike the family, and the different ways that people can organize themselves when they move beyond the family. Above all, he focussed on Aristotle's idea that the constitution of the state should aim at achieving good, in a way that is related to each particular people and its situation, and then led us through various possibilities of what that "good" might be, in particular asking whether the goods aimed at by western constitutions are the goods that the peoples of the Pacific want to achieve. Having prepared us to think about the political sphere, on the final morning he looked at "Church and State or Religion and Political Life."

Each day, after the keynote talk, the conference participants gave their own papers. A number of papers – those by Simon Davidson (Sonoma), Barrie Abel (Sonoma), Joses Imona (Sonoma), and Tim Meadowcroft (Laidlaw) – were based on particular biblical passages or books (Jeremiah, Jonah, Acts, and Daniel) that exemplified a possible relation between God's people on the one hand and a king or a city, normally a hostile one, on the other. Although the state was hostile, the attitude of God's people was more nuanced, as is elegantly captured by the verse Simon Davidson chose as the title of his paper, "Pray for the peace and prosperity of the city" (Jer 29:7).

Some other papers set out to expose those ways in which the state tries to usurp a religious rôle. Joel Bernardo (MI) did this in a general way in "Demystifying PNG Politics," as also did Kirene Yandit (CLTC). Joseph Vnuk (CTI) argued that it is not the state, but only Christ, that can achieve a true reconciliation and a true peace; and Sussie Stanley (Sonoma) took the historical example of the First Council of Nicaea to present the case that the church should never allow the state to dictate matters of belief.

In regulating relations between people, the state must take a stand on relations between men and women, and three papers tackled various aspects of that issue: some of the more controversial papers of the conference fall into this group. Jenny Tobul (CLTC) explored the factors that limit women's perspectives on ministry among Tungag women; Brandon Zimmerman (GSS) looked to Thomas Aquinas to give natural law arguments against polygamy; and Scott Charlesworth (UNE), by drawing compari-

sons with slavery, argued (among other things) that the passages about the submission of women in the New Testament household codes should not be used to keep women out of ministry.

In keeping with MATS policy, papers were presented that did not relate directly to the theme, but which provided opportunities for post-graduate students to speak on their research, such as the paper of Steven Yamok (CLTC) on the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, some of the speakers drew on their own extensive experience. Archbishop Douglas Young, although focussing on what Catholic social teaching has to say on the conference theme, often illustrated his talk with examples from his own extensive work on government committees. Coming from a much less friendly state, Vongai Mkaronda (Newton) spoke of her experience of church-state relations in Zimbabwe, an experience of fear, of courage, and of solidarity.

One question that emerged a number of times was that of religious freedom. There have been moves at various times in PNG to outlaw Islam, and many argued that this is not an appropriate thing for a state to do, even a Christian state. Taking its lead from this, and from the great diversity among the Christians who make up MATS, the theme for the next conference emerged: Inter-faith and Ecumenical Dialogue in Melanesia. This theme was endorsed by the MATS Annual General Meeting, which also accepted Pacific Adventist University's generous offer to host MATS 2018, which will be held from Tuesday 17th to Thursday 19th July.

The annual meeting on the final day of the conference elected a new Executive Committee:

Joseph Vnuk (President),
Josef Imona (Vice President),
Bruce Renich (Secretary/Treasurer),
Bishop Jack Urame and Garo Kilagi (Members at Large),
Jacklyn Nembai (Student Representative).

The meeting also looked closely at the *Melanesian Journal of Theology*. Tim Meadowcroft was appointed editor from mid 2018, and it was left to the new MATS Executive to appoint an associate editor. Decisions were also made to set up an editorial board and to continue to publish the journal twice a year. There was also a desire to improve our presence on the internet, and Tim Meadowcroft was asked to make some enquiries about web-

site design. The other major decision relating to the activity of MATS was the possibility of engaging a volunteer field-worker, not only to promote MATS among the theological colleges, but to assist the colleges in the task of meeting academic standards and complying with legislation. It is hoped that eventually MATS might win back its accrediting role.

The return to the centre proved to be a strengthening moment for MATS, and it is hoped that the 2018 conference, also to be held in Port Moresby, will enable further consolidation. But it would not be good to hold every conference in the national capital. The dialogue that sustains good theology is not only between denominations that once engaged in polemics that we shall explore at the conference. It is also a dialogue that takes place within denominations and across denominational boundaries, between large and small, recent and ancient, local and universal, and between margins and centre.