



MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

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Editorial

Geoffrey D. Dunn

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Peer Reviewed Articles

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part 2:**

History, the Resurrected Jesus Christ, the Living Spirit

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REPORT ON MATS 2021 CONFERENCE: THEOLOGY AND SOCIAL ISSUES IN MELANESIA

Barrie Abel Jr

Sonoma Adventist College, Sonoma, Papua New Guinea

The Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS) faced significant challenges to holding its annual conferences during the Covid-19 pandemic. The health crisis posed significant risks and restrictions, hence, it became impossible for participants to travel or participate in a physical gathering. This saw the cancellation of the 2020 MATS conference, which was supposed to be hosted by the Uniting Church of PNG at the Emmaus Centre in Port Moresby from 29 June to 1 July 2020.

Sonoma Adventist College gladly accepted the invitation by the MATS executive to host the 2021 MATS conference. The theme proposed for the 2020 conference was to be adopted: “Theology and Social Issues in Melanesia”. Preparation for the conference was tough because of the continuous ambiguity associated with the unpredictable nature of the Covid-19 situation in the country. However, a solution was decided through the ongoing discussions between the host and MATS executives. The MATS conference 2021 was decided to be held virtually. Better still, it was going to be co-hosted! Several dates and venues were proposed, then finally locked in. The closing date for receipt of abstracts was set at the end of August 2021, and the MATS conference 2021, was held from 5 to 6 October 2021, in Sonoma Adventist College. Pacific Adventist University (PAU), and the Christian Leadership Training College (CLTC) were appointed to be co-hosts. This arrangement utilized the internet technology (Zoom), and heavily depended on the expertise of the IT staff on each venue.

The conference format was basic. As usual, there were little breaks in-between, at least 2 or 3 30-minute-sessions. The conference attendees in Sonoma were mainly the theology faculty and students, as well as a representative from Rarongo School of Theological and Mission. Attendees in PAU were mainly PAU presenters, a few postgraduate students, and faculty. There were also attendees from CTI and a representative from the Catholic bishops of PNG and Solomon Islands.

The theme allowed for a wide range of topics in the areas of Old Testament, New Testament, missions, and theology. The purpose was to encourage theologians to share theological responses to and reflect upon current social issues in Melanesia with each other and the Christian communities we represent. Theological students were given 20 minutes for presentation and 10 minutes of questions. Established theologians were invited to present 30-minute papers that were followed by 15 minutes of questions from the audience. It was unfortunate that a few papers were not presented. Still, the abstracts received are worth acknowledging in this report.

The first day began with a short welcome from the principal of Sonoma Adventist College, Dr Isako Esekia, and an opening address given by the MATS president, Dr Maxon Mani, who zoomed in with the group from CLTC. This was followed by the address from the keynote speaker, Fr Philip Gibbs, from Divine Word University (DWU). These presentations set the pace of the entire conference. Fr Gibbs' presentation pointed the participants to the archive he created, where one can find social concerns as reported in the daily news outlets since May 2012.

The abstracts received covered a wide range of issues, as well as providing pathways toward solutions and/or more research. Beginning from the Highlands region, Charles Dufour from Good Shepherd Seminary had two abstracts: "Peace: A New Paradigm in PNG" and "A Papua New Guinean Religious Perspective on Sorcery."

The papers from the co-host in CLTC came from Dr Maxon Mani and two Master of Theology students. Maxon Mani's paper discussed the Melanesian concept of *Nem* and its influence on marital violence in PNG. It further proposed the biblical and theological concepts of 'service' and 'servanthood' as foundational principles for an alternative male-female power relationship.

Walokamu Vali, a Master of Theology student at CLTC, presented a paper on the occult in secondary schools of Port Moresby, followed by a theological critique and response. Another MTh student, Kalmasing Tolish, presented a biblical response to the new spirituality in the Presbyterian Church of Vanuatu, with reference to the Mewun people of South West Bay, Malekula. It was special to have a presenter from Vanuatu.

Exceptional contributions also came from the co-host in PAU. Brandon Zimmerman from CTI presented a paper on religious freedom as a

Christianity value, with some reflection on the Qu'ran, concluding with some remarks on communal benefits of inter-religious dialogue.

From the PAU team, Carol and David Tasker presented a theological and social investigation of the issue of absent fathers, especially the role of parenting in modelling children's ideas of God. Also, the team comprising of Unia Api, Joses Imona, and Clare Kokinai, presented a paper entitled "Perceptions and Experiences of Conflicts and Reconciliation among Seventh-day Adventists: Preliminary Findings of a Qualitative Study in Papua New Guinea." This presentation highlighted the value of engaging in research amicable approaches to address social issues and their solutions in twenty-first-century Melanesia, and from the context of the church in PNG.

Other fascinating presenters were Jason Siwat, who highlighted the issue of refugees and the Christian duty to care for them. Kemona Dereba, an MTh student, presented his research on bride price as a key Melanesian value of community and how it can be used as a tool for the Gospel. Newton Ekodia's paper was on pre-marital sexual practices. The paper proposed that sound biblical and theological education can effectively address this issue among the Anglican Church of Papua New Guinea.

From the host, Sonoma Adventist College, Simon Davidson addressed the issue of poverty by identifying and discussing principles drawn from the creation account in Genesis, while Barrie Abel Jr and Malinda Philip's paper looked at perceptions of the Christians in the Susurunga area of New Ireland Province on their practice of using the Bible as an object to channel supernatural powers for purposes such as healing, protection, and evidently revenge.

Having the MATS conference virtually is a significant milestone in the history of MATS conferences. A significant advantage was the low financial expenses. It cost much less in terms of travel and hosting expenses. The three hosts were given a subsidy of K500 each.

Apart from the challenges of Covid-19, the technical encounters of black outs or internet outage became a hiccup a few times, but there were no significant misfortunes. The experience of 'going virtual' meant that physical presence was not available, and that posed a significant challenge in terms of presenters' engagement with their audience on the other co-host venues. Otherwise, it was an adventurous experience.

Acknowledgment to the MATS executives, especially Brandon Zimmerman, the secretary, and president Maxon Mani, for their continuous

guidance, and the various respective hosting institutions' administration. Special gratitude to the keynote speakers: Drs Carol and David Tasker, and Fr Philip Gibbs for their valuable input in the discussions. Also, the contributors who sent in and presented the various excellent papers, addressing the conference theme.