

Volume 34, Issue 1–2

2018

MELANESIAN JOURNAL OF THEOLOGY

Editorial

Tim Meadowcroft

Report on MATS 2018:

Interfaith and Ecumenical Dialogue in Melanesia

Thomas Davai Jr.

Peer Reviewed Articles

**Male-Centric Biblical Literature and Marital Violence:
Reading through Melanesian Interpretive Lenses**

Part 1

Maxon Mani

Aquinas on Polygamy

Brandon Zimmerman

**Epistemology and Pastoral Practice:
Applications in Melanesian Contexts**

Paul Anthony McGavin

Journal of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools



REPORT ON MATS 2018: INTERFAITH AND ECUMENCIAL DIALOGUE IN MELANESIA

Thomas Davai Jr
formerly of Pacific Adventist University

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This conference report is based on the 2018 Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS) annual conference that was hosted and organized by the School of Humanities, Education and Theology (SofHET) at the Pacific Adventist University (PAU), Koiari Park campus on 17–19 July, 2018.¹

This conference report acknowledges God’s faithful leading and valuable support from the conference major sponsor, SofHET of PAU, and co-sponsors, South Pacific Division of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (SPD), Papua New Guinea Union Mission of the Seventh-day Adventist Church (PNGUM), Sonoma Adventist College, and Sanitarium, Australia. PAU in partnership with other Seventh-day Adventist stakeholders provided funding for MATS 2018. Sanitarium Australia provided the healthy breakfast in accordance with the SDA health ministry; Sonoma College funded the flash drives where all the conference presentations were stored and distributed to each participant; and SPD and PNGUM funded the printing of the program and other advertising outputs.

This conference report is indebted to the commitment and dedication of the conference Organizing Committee, SofHET, PAU Administration and Academic Senate, Staff and Students, Support Services, DOSS Office and Student Services, Postgraduate Studies and Research Office, School of Health Sciences, MATS Executive Committee and friends, wantoks and families.

The conference convener was Dr Unia Api (Lecturer, SofHET, PAU) and co-convener/secretary was Thomas Davai Jr (at the time Lecturer,

¹ This report is an abbreviated form of the full conference report of the conference committee at PAU. The full version is available from the editor of *Melanesian Journal of Theology* on request.

SofHET, PAU) who also served on the conference Organizing Committee as chair and co-chair respectively. This conference report was prepared by the conference Editorial Task Group which is the sub-committee of the Organising Committee. This report also acknowledges the input of the conference co-convenor/secretary who was also the chair of the editorial task group in putting together this conference report with the SofHET Dean, Dr Elisapesi Manson.

This conference report also acknowledges the conference keynote speakers and dozens of presenters from across Papua New Guinea and the Pacific including Fiji, Australia, and New Zealand, as well as more than one hundred and twenty participants who were engaged in the intensive three days of conference dialogue. Specifically the following institutions/organizations were represented:

- Pacific Adventist University
- Christian Leaders' Training College
- Catholic Theological Institute
- Rarongo Theological College
- Sonoma Adventist College
- Martin Luther Seminary
- Fulton Adventist College, Fiji
- Laidlaw College, New Zealand
- Salvation Army Officer Training College
- Central Papua Conference NCD and Eastern Highlands Simbu Mission of SDA
- Other ministerial educators, ministers, pastors, and laymen from PNG.

INTRODUCTION

MATS conference is the platform where the objectives of MATS may be realized. Theologians, philosophers, and post graduate students in Melanesia come together annually to present academic papers on certain cross-cutting issues faced by Melanesians and to foster cooperation and exchange of ideas so as to promote best practice in theological education in Melanesia. In addition, the MATS annual conferences seek to encourage high standards of biblical and theological scholarship, especially culturally relevant scholarship, amongst member schools, and to promote professional

development and scholarly publication. Since its conception, MATS annual conferences have proven that are an ideal venue for healthy inter-denominational dialogue. The 2018 conference focused on the theme “Inter-Faith and Ecumenical Dialogue in Melanesia.”

The three-day conference comprised of six keynote presentations with two presentations per day for a duration of fifty minutes followed by ten minutes for questions. In addition, nine concurrent plenary sessions were facilitated during the conference with three speakers per session. The conference was structured to foster discussion and dialogue between participants around the conference theme. This was achieved by hosting small group discussions after each concurrent presentation and full group discussions after each keynote presentation. Each day of the conference also allotted one hour for lunch, and twenty minutes for morning and afternoon break to allow participants to continue their discussions after each session and promote collaboration and networking. Time was allocated at the end of each day for a group reflection on the day’s discussions. The MATS annual general meeting was also held as the final session on the last day of the conference. This was followed by a final dinner, a chance to celebrate a successful conference.

KEYNOTE PRESENTATIONS

The conference was privileged to have three keynote speakers addressing the conference theme. The first speaker was Professor Daniel Shaw from Fuller Seminary, USA. Professor Shaw spoke on rituals as worship. He highlighted that there is a worldwide phenomenon as world religions interact. Professor Shaw noted that this interaction also affects relationships within Christianity. He emphasized that when dealing with religious expression we must by definition deal with “interfaith and ecumenical” dialogue and religious pluralism; it must be part of theological training in Melanesia.

Professor Shaw emphasized a historical approach to cross-cultural theologizing, and that culturally appropriate styles impact how people worship. According to Professor Shaw, appropriate worship is tied to appropriate ritual and ceremony, that makes sense for people in their context. Professor Shaw also stated that when Melanesians respond to rituals as worship, people must be allowed to develop a theology rooted in Scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit, and done by the church as a hermeneutical

community. Professor Shaw then emphasized that following this process will result in ministries of discipline, pastoring, teaching, and missioning.

The second speaker was Dr Limoni Manu who is currently a church pastor of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in New Zealand. Dr Manu is the first SDA Pacific Islander, of Tongan origin, to achieve a doctoral degree in historical and theological studies. He spoke on the dissident or fringe movements that have been an attribute of some community groups and religious organizations. He gave biblical examples emphasizing that even Israel, on her pilgrimage to Canaan, faced rebellion. He highlighted that individuals would usually rise, influence, and lead a following of people (see Num 11:1, 4–6, 10; Exod 12:38; Lev 24:10–11). Dr Manu also mentioned that Miriam and Aaron, siblings of Moses, murmured against him (Num 12:1–15). Others, like, Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, staged a public revolt (Num 16:1–50).

Dr Limoni highlighted that the struggles of Israel are no different to that experienced by Christian religions. He emphasized that the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Melanesia also battles with this issue. According to Dr Limoni, since Adventists came to the Pacific, a plethora of dissenting groups has risen within its ranks. Some vital questions he asked were: what underlying reasons do we have to explain this experience? Can we pick up a petal from history and offer solutions to the challenges faced in Melanesia?

The third speaker was Rev Bernard Siai. He has a wealth of experience as a result of his pastoral work in various roles including Chaplain of Wesley High School, Circuit Minister, Bishop United Church Papuan Islands Region, and the Moderator United Church, PNG. Rev Siai talked on church and globalization. By this he reiterated that the technological advances of “developed countries” are now demanding Melanesians to catch up with them. Doctrinal changes and value deconstructions in other parts of the world are influencing established Christian beliefs that we have held so long in our churches in Melanesia. The push by Western developed nations to be like them or to be like the rest of the world is stronger than ever before on us Melanesians. In spite of this, he emphasized that our global task is to reach the world with the love of Jesus.

According to Rev Siai, “any dialogue on Christian values is most important testimony of faith in the face of contemporary and changing society that is being challenged for its religious roots.” Rev Siai emphasized that there is values deconstruction taking place. “Christian values have been altered, replaced, and watered down. There is values deconstruction taking

place.” Siai questioned: “could we not call upon PNGCC to air our voice in defense of our faith and Christian values?” Rev Siai further elaborated that “at the same time Christians, we need to ask the question what are the positive and negatives about globalization that we need to be aware of.”

CONCURRENT PRESENTATIONS

The conference theme on “Inter-Faith and Ecumenical Dialogue in Melanesia” engaged various presenters on the topic concurrently. The presentations were clustered under biblical, theological, missiological, philosophical perspectives, and ministerial education.

BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

Barrie Abel Jr (Sonoma) spoke on God and the birth of the need to dialogue by giving reference to the Garden of Eden (Gen 3:7–10, 21). Joseph Vnuk (CTI) discussed the language of faith as a language of dialogue from the heroes of faith of Hebrews 11. Joses Imona’s (PAU) presentation was based on the Covenant Eschatology in the NT Apocalypse: A Platform for Ecumenical Dialogue which gave reference to Max L. Stackhouse’s concluding remarks in his article, “The Moral Meanings of Covenant.”

Tim Meadowcroft (Laidlaw) presented “Secularism, Psalm 104, and the Melanesian Context,” in the light of Charles Taylor’s analysis of secularism. He read Psalm 104 and considered the extent to which this hymn encourages a more secular form of belief and the extent to which it draws the reader back into a more enchanted age. According to Meadowcroft, to what extent does the biblical witness challenge aspects of the Melanesian worldview, and to what extent does it encourage the reader to affirm aspects of that worldview? And might this be helpful in understanding and navigating the tension between the global and the local, the modern and the pre-modern, characteristic of Melanesia?

THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Modest Eligi (CTI) presented the Christian (Catholic) attitude on inter-faith dialogue emphasizing the efforts of the Universal Church and Papua New Guinea in particular in the dialogue with people of other faiths. Simon Davidson (Sonoma) explored the challenges and opportunities that will arise in ecumenical dialogue with religious movements that are non-Christian in

Melanesia. Sussie Stanley (Sonoma) argued that while Christianity takes Bible as the supreme guide of life and belief in Christ as Lord, there exist differences in doctrinal understanding among Christian churches.

Douglas Young (Mt Hagen) spoke on “Catholic and Adventist Dialogue in Melanesia.” Young highlighted that the relationship between the Catholic Church and the Seventh Day Adventist Church in Papua New Guinea has been characterized by conflict and negative characterizations from both churches. This can be viewed as an “intractable” conflict. Both churches have the same position on ecumenical dialogue, that it can never mean compromise on fundamental aspects of biblical truth. Young explored the official or quasi-official stance towards ecumenism of each church, drawing on official or quasi-official statements, and the history of dialogue in Papua New Guinea. He indicated areas of agreement and difference and pointed to a way forward.

Thomas Davai Jr (PAU) discussed that SDA does not exist in isolation from other Christian communities, but looks at the positive ecumenism that fosters practical, on-the-ground, issue-oriented fellowship, and caring for other Christians. This is based on the biblical principle that our primary calling is to love God with our whole being and our neighbours as ourselves. Loren Poli (PAU) also highlighted that when discussing *sola scriptura* in inter-faith and ecumenical dialogues, the best method most biblical scholars suggest is the “historical grammatical” approach. It is only after one has understood better the historical context, dates, the original languages of the authors that one can apply the truths therein to our twenty-first century contexts. According to Poli, any method outside of this has led to the misapplication of the Scripture and what is sometimes branded as heresy by some.

George Paki (CPC) argued that when it comes to “Speaking in Tongues,” Christianity is divided into two camps. One group thinks the gift is a heavenly language that serves as a sign of Spirit-baptism, while the other is of the opinion that the gift consists of an “earthly language” that is given for the purpose of evangelism. Peter Korave (PAU) spoke on an Investigation of Conflict Reconciliations in Seventh-day Adventist Churches in Papua New Guinea. According to Korave, in the realm of social conflicts, violence, and ethnic clashes, Melanesians continue to strive for peace and harmony through some form of reconciliation processes. These recon-

ciliation processes are crucial as they serve to mend social relationships and hold the society intact.

MISSIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

Rex Titus Alomon (Sonoma) through analysis of literary research, field observations, and interviews, highlighted principles of dialogue between missionary endeavours across denominational boundaries in Melanesia. William Longgar (CLTC) used two social concepts in his presentation: the “disentangling,” which refers to cultural activities in which people attempt to resolve conflict, and their “tangled” relations; and the *talamoa*, which is a Tongan practice of storytelling with the purposes of facilitating mediation and conflict resolution. Unia Api (PAU) also demonstrated a case study of the Kamea story of doing a biblical theology of *gutpela sindaun* as relevant to inter-faith dialogue. Johnny Tango (Fulton) spoke on “Christianized or Civilized?” His presentation was a reflection of the early Christian missions in Melanesia (Solomons) from a “theo-anthropological framework,” which enables a third generation Christian believer to review the accounts and eloquently respond to the question: civilized or Christianized? Emmanuel Som Yalamu (Martin Luther Seminary) spoke on “Decolonising Romans 12:9–21 in Search of a Sustainable Melanesian Hermeneutic of Community.”

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Brandon Zimmerman’s (CTI) presentation served to introduce Melanesian Christians to a debate among Western political philosophers about the role of religion in political dialogue.

MINISTERIAL EDUCATION

Gairo Onagi (Rarongo) highlighted that there is a diminishing role of the churches in education in PNG. This was based on a case study in the United church of various policy developments by the state.

Elisapesi Manson’s (PAU) presentation was based on “Enhancing Ministerial Training in Melanesia through an Alignment of Learning Outcomes to a National Qualification Framework.” According to Manson, an institution-wide process of learning outcomes reconfiguration and alignment to the Papua New Guinea National Qualification Framework (PNGNQF) emerged as a worthwhile collaborative curriculum driven process. Manson

pointed out that this study investigated reflections from ministers, graduates, ministers in training, relevant employers, and stakeholders on the effectiveness of the ministerial training at Pacific Adventist University using qualitative approaches. According to Manson, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using surveys and focus group interviews, and findings from the study informed the alignment of the ministerial training to the PNGNQF. Manson also highlighted that although the attempt to fully reflect the institutional graduate attributes in the alignment was challenging, it was achievable with enhanced ministerial training outcomes that are compatible in the broader context.

POSTGRADUATE THESIS PRESENTATIONS

MATS 2018 conference was also privileged to have postgraduate students present their theses at the conference. Sharon Botu's (CLTC) thesis was titled: "Discipleship among the Baptist Young people." According to Botu, lack of effective disciple making among the young people is believed to be one of the main impediments to growth of young Christians in Baptist churches today. According to her findings, many of the young people slowly drift away from the church because they are not trained and nurtured well in the ways of the Lord by someone who is mature.

Samuel Natina's (PAU) thesis was based on "Moral Holiness in Leviticus." In his presentation, Natina argued that moral holiness/purity cannot be overlooked in Leviticus 1–15. According to Natina, Moral holiness is the fundamental principle that runs through chapters 1–15. That is, moral purity is obtained in the presence of God through transference of sin to the owner of impurities. Holiness is the result of ritual transference of sin through the sacrifices of animals.

Henao Mea's (PAU) thesis title was "Preservation of Scripture: A Theological Reflection on the Evidence of Preservation by Textual Variants." Mea highlighted the theory of preservation of the Scriptures, and the issue in the theory of preservation is to identify what was preserved: the text and text-type or the content? According to Mea, while the idea of a preservation of Scripture may not be popular and to some degree restricted to the text of the New Testament, the fact remains that the Bible, Old and the New Testament, has been preserved in a divine manner so as not to be corrupted.

Albert Tauli's (Rarongo) thesis title was "Enhancing of Human Resources Development in Church Growth." The key question in Tauli's the-

sis was, “how can the churches or the ecumenical body of churches unite in sharing their human resources *in nation-building*?” Tauli also agreed that interfaith and ecumenical dialogue in Melanesian can be primarily about resource sharing in order to play a greater role to effect changes in the development of people lives.

Jack Takali’s (Rarongo) thesis title was “Unity in Diversity: Sustenance of Our Melanesian Spiritual Heritage.” The paper explored Christian unity in diversity in order to understand the Melanesian spiritual heritage which enables the joy of independence, flexibility, and diversity. Takali conducted a case study in the United Church in Papua New Guinea in order to understand the unity in diversity in the wider Melanesian faith communities. His research identified cracks in this unity to be shifting towards a more individualistic Western worldview. He elaborated that it is vital to sustain and uphold this unique Melanesian Christian identity.

Herea Vagi’s (Rarongo) thesis title was “Leadership Crises a Hindrance to Unity and the Growth of the Churches in Melanesia.” Vagi’s paper highlights a few major factors to leadership crisis, such as abuse of power and authority in decision making, lack of pastoral knowledge, lack of administration skills in the church, and that these are affecting unity and growth of the church. These are affecting the growth and development of the church in her pastoral and administrative functions.

CONFERENCE EVALUATION AND REVIEW

An evaluation form was distributed to all participants during the final session of the conference for each participant to review the conference and submit to the organisers for analysis. A comprehensive analysis is available in the full version of this report, available on application to the editor of the *Melanesian Journal of Theology*.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this report commends the Conference Organisation Committee from the School of Humanities, Education and Theology at Pacific Adventist University for effectively organising a conference that brought together more than 120 participants for an engaging dialogue on critical theological themes within the Melanesian context, and for building longlasting collaboration and networking with fellow theological educators. The report

commends all the keynote speakers for committing their valuable times to share their expertise with the conference participants, and also thanks all concurrent presenters.

The 2018 annual general meeting conducted during the last session of the conference highlighted the critical role of MATS as an agent to foster scholarly dialogue for theologians and post-graduate students with possibilities to build trust and flexibility and effective working relationships in a multi-denominational and multi-level context. In addition, the annual general meeting provided an opportunity for the constitution to be reviewed, and it was stressed that MATS should continue to work on its accreditation function, to develop and manage its own finances, and to continue to improve its journal for a quality and wider readership. It was also voted that MATS 2019 will be hosted by the Christian Leaders' Training College (CLTC).

This report concludes with gratefulness and thanks for how the Lord led the 2018 conference and with confidence that the objectives of the conference were truly achieved. To God be the glory!