Methodism and Aboriginal People in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

A story of neglect, failure and atonement and its legacy for the Uniting Church

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In 1915 the Methodist Overseas Mission Board in Sydney sent the Rev. James Watson to find a suitable site for a mission to Aboriginal people in northern Australia. While travelling throughout Arnhem Land with an Aboriginal team of three men and a ten-year-old boy, and meeting the West Arnhem Land people, Watson wrote in his report to the Board:

Strange that the Methodist Church should have neglected such an interesting people all these years. I wonder why?  

Watson's question has never been satisfactorily answered. My purpose in this article, therefore, is to examine those reasons or factors that led to Methodism's neglect of Aboriginal people in the second half of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth, and then to discover why they did eventually go. It is the thesis of this article that whatever it was that finally spurred Methodists into action, it still impacts upon the life of the Uniting Church. More precisely, I want to argue that when the Methodist Church of Australasia did eventually resume work among Aboriginal people, one of the motivating factors was atonement for the wrongs done to Aboriginal people since European colonisation.

So back to Watson's question: Why did the Methodist Church 'neglect' Aboriginal people for almost 65 years—for at least all of the second-half of the nineteenth century and the first decade-and-a-half of the twentieth? Why had it taken so long? For a Church that prided itself on its missionary work, it is somewhat puzzling. Why was Christ's commission, 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Matt 28:19), all but ignored by Methodists as far as Indigenous people were concerned? Why was John Wesley's charge to his preachers to go to those who needed them, and to those who needed them most ignored, when it came to Aboriginal people? The Rev. Bill Edwards and the Rev. Bernie Clarke, arguably two of the most knowledgeable Uniting Church ministers on Aboriginal matters, have observed that Watson's question still awaits a convincing answer.

Of the four major churches in Australia at the beginning of the twentieth century—the Church of England, the Catholic Church, the Presbyterian Church, and the Methodists Church—the Methodists were the last to engage in missionary work among Aboriginal people in northern Australia.

By the time Watson wrote his report for the Methodist Board of Missions in 1915, the Church of England had already four missions: Yarrabah Mission, twenty kilometres south of Cairns in North Queensland, was established in 1892; the Mitchell River Mission on the eastern side of the Gulf of Carpentaria was established in 1905, the Roper River Mission on the west coast of the Gulf in 1907, and the Forrest River Mission in North-west Australia in 1913.

The Catholic Church, for its part, had established a mission on the Daly River in the Northern Territory in 1885 which lasted until 1889 before being washed away in a flood; then in 1910 a Catholic Mission was established on Bathurst Island, one of the Tiwi Islands, situated 70km north of Darwin.

Even Methodism’s traditional rival, the Presbyterian Church, was quicker out of the blocks. Together, with the Moravians, they established a mission at Mapoon on western Cape York in Far North Queensland in 1891, a second at Arukun (south of Weipa) in 1904, and a third at Mornington Island situated at the bottom of the Gulf in 1914.

Causes of Methodist neglect

All mainline churches were slow to resume missions among Aboriginal people after the colonial era, but Methodism seems to have been exceptionally tardy. What were the factors that contributed to Methodism’s neglect of Aboriginal people? Three stand out.

Memory of the failure of early colonial missions
The first reason was the painful memory of failure. During the first half of the nineteenth century, the Methodists, or more precisely, the Wesleyan Missionary Society, operating out of London, had tried four times to establish missions among Aboriginal people, and each time they ended in dismal failure.
Failure’ in these instances has little to do with the number of conversions or the number of baptisms, it simply means that for various reasons, the institution collapsed.

The authors of the official four-volume history of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (founded in 1818) describe its chapter on Aboriginal missions as ‘short and sad’. Its first mission was established in 1823. It culminated in the building of a boarding-school near Parramatta for Aboriginal children and children of mixed race. At first the experiment looked promising. William Walker, the missionary, was confident that from the handful of children he had gathered, there would emerge future evangelists and teachers of their people. The children, however, soon wearied of the ‘cage-like’ existence of boarding school, compulsory drilling in catechisms and primers and became sick. When two of the boys died exciting much fear and resentment on the part of the Aboriginal people, and when Walker, himself, was stricken with illness, the experiment collapsed. An older Anglican school for Aboriginal children failed later in a similar way.

The Wesleyans tried a second time to establish a mission among Aboriginal people in New South Wales in the mid-1820s. After false starts at Wellington and Batemans Bay, the missionary, John Harper, was sent to the Richmond–Windsor district with instructions to teach as many Aboriginal boys and girls as he could find. In January 1828, Harper reported to his District Meeting that the local Aboriginal people were impossible to teach and he seriously doubted any possibility of success. Six months later Harper resigned his office as a Wesleyan Missionary on the grounds that he could see no possible means of prosecuting the mission in a manner satisfactory either to the public or to himself.

In 1836 a third attempt to resuscitate mission work among Aboriginal people took place in the Port Phillip district, then part of New South Wales. Some 64,000 acres were set aside by the Government for a mission situated mid-way between the newly-formed town of Melbourne and the infant port of Geelong. The mission, known as Buntingdale, was isolated and large enough for farming and various other industries. However, with different clans refusing to live and work together, it also proved impossible to institute a general system of education and labour. Squatters also began to intrude into the district bringing their pernicious influence with them. Rather than being a Christian refuge, as the missionaries hoped, the mission appeared to be a hot-bed of strife. The Buntingdale mission also failed. It lingered on until 1848, but it had well and truly failed before then. The Government withdrew its support and the mission was abandoned with little or nothing to show for its efforts.

The fourth attempt took place in the Swan River Colony from 1840 to 1855 under the missionary, John Smithies. Like its predecessors, the Swan River Mission was doomed to failure. One of the reasons was the pressures of European settlement and its deleterious impact on Aboriginal family life and

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social organisation. Another reason for its failure was the missionary’s unwillingness to learn from the Aborigines. The distinguished social anthropologist, Ronald Berndt, aptly comments in the Foreword to William McNair and Hilary Rumley’s study of Smithies’s pioneer mission:

Communication between Aborigines and Europeans remained more or less a one-way discourse: Aborigines were to learn, Europeans to teach. In spite of Smithies’ initial interest in ‘Aboriginal Customs’, that was where the matter stood during the whole period he spent in Western Australia.

The early missions connected with other Churches fared not much better than the Methodists. Lancelot Threlkeld London Missionary Society mission in the Port Macquarie area ended in failure. An Anglican Mission established in the Wellington Valley in 1830, through the co-operation of the Church Missionary Society and the New South Wales Government, met the same fate. A German Mission in the Moreton Bay area was also a failure. Jean Woolmington, in her major study of early colonial missions in New South Wales, has seen ‘failure’ as their most conspicuous feature. John Harris’s monumental study of 200 years of Aboriginal encounter with Christianity, One Blood, names ‘failure’ as the ‘inescapable verdict’ of early missions. The historian, Hilary Carey, also writes:

Failure...has become the great theme of European narrative about colonial missions to the Australian Aborigines. It lacerates the journals of the missionaries in the field, plagues the reports of colonial funding authorities in Sydney and London and lends gloom to the proceedings of mission organisations.

The memory of failure affected all Churches but it seems to have had a greater effect on the Methodists. At least other Churches tried to work among Aboriginal people with varying degrees of success in the second half of the nineteenth century, but the Methodists gave up altogether. James Colwell, Methodism’s official historian at the turn of the twentieth century, concludes his chapter titled ‘Mission to the Aborigines’ in his massive Illustrated History of Methodism (1904) with the ‘sad admission’ that: ‘The Methodist Church has sought to do her duty to the Aborigines; but, like all others, she has fallen short of success’. Ten years later, in a chapter titled ‘The Australian Aborigine’ written for the centenary history of Methodist missions in the Pacific, James Bowes, an ex-President of the Methodist Church in Queensland, tells the same story:

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10 Harris, One Blood, p. 126.
12 Colwell, The Illustrated History of Methodism, p. 191.
The total native population of the Commonwealth is a little under 90,000. Of this number not a tenth is being reached by the Churches. The Methodist Church in Australia is not represented by any agent in this work. Her interest in the aborigines would appear to have evaporated, through her failure during the first half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{13}

A dying race

A second and related factor that contributed to Methodist neglect of Aboriginal missions in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century is more difficult to discuss. It was the widespread belief that the Aboriginal people were a dying race. During this period the evidence seemed irrefutable. In the more settled areas of south-eastern Australia, people of full Aboriginal descent were fast disappearing. Even the emerging Aboriginal people of mixed Aboriginal and European descent were declining in numbers. In 1911, the Australian Bureau of Statistics estimated that the Aboriginal population before European colonisation which was somewhere between 300,000 and 750,000 had plummeted to 31,000. In Tasmania the decline had been catastrophic, dropping by 96\% over thirty years. In Victoria their numbers had dropped from 15,000 in 1837 to about 600 in 1911; in Queensland in 1840 a rough reckoning gave the number as 200,000, by 1911 there were not many more than 20,000.

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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{population_decline.png}
\caption{Estimated population decline, 1788–1920.}
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In the forty years from 1850 to 1890, the depopulation was so obvious that Aborigines were considered

a ‘doomed race’. George Thornton, the Mayor of Sydney who became the first Protector of Aborigines in New South Wales in 1881, reflected the views of humanitarians of the time, ‘I cannot conceal my knowledge of the painful fact that the black Aborigines are fast disappearing, destined to become extinct.’ Around the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, it was predicted that Aboriginal people had fifty years before extinction.

There were a few missionaries like the Rev. John Gribble (a convert from Methodism to Anglicanism) who rejected the ‘doomed race’ doctrine, but most missionaries and humanitarians succumbed to the all-pervading view that the disappearance of the Aboriginal people was a regrettable but unstoppable phenomenon. Those churches in Australia that did establish missions for Aboriginal people in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth were, to a large extent, driven by humanitarian concerns. They saw their task as offering comfort to the last of a dying race. ‘To smooth the dying pillow of the Aboriginal race’ became the slogan of those campaigning for some kind of charitable response. Herbert Pitts, an Anglican clergyman, writing about Yarrabah mission in 1914, captures the prevailing mood of the time.

“The natives are dying out,” [and] we are told, “why not let them die?” But is it thus that a mother treats her dying child? No. It is over the dying child that she bends down with the fondest love-light gleaming in her eye.

The Methodist response to this tragic situation was strangely silent. They were aware of the suffering and the vulnerability of Aboriginal people in the wake of colonial expansion but chose not to act, not to hear or see what Bishop Gilbert White of Carpentaria, described as ‘Lazarus at their gate’. Instead of acknowledging a serious social problem, most Methodists simply followed the wisdom of the day and assumed that Aboriginal extinction was inevitable. There was no point in reaching out, not even to protect or ease the pain. They swallowed the ‘doomed race’ theory hook, line and sinker. James Colwell’s *Illustrated History of Methodism* unabashedly expressed what most Methodists thought: ‘[A]ll the arts of civilization and the influences of Christianity combined have failed to raise him [the Aboriginal person]. Falling back before the white man’s approach, the time is not far distant when he will disappear.’

Commitments in the Pacific

The third factor contributing to Methodism’s neglect of Aboriginal people in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was that their missionary commitments in the Pacific took precedence. After 1855 Australasian Wesleyan Methodism took over responsibility from London for all the existing Wesleyan Missions in the Pacific and initiated many new ones. In the nineteenth century there was a romantic glow about the Pacific. Like a holiday in Hawaii, the Pacific was a glamorous place for a missionary to go. Norman Goodall, the historian of the London Missionary Society, called

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the Pacific ‘The Wonderland of Christian Missions’ and Australian Methodists were determined to play their part.

In 1822 the Wesleyans had entered Tonga. In little over a decade there was a revival in two of the major island groupings in Tonga and some 2,000 people converted. Within five years of the revival, virtually the whole Tongan nation had converted to Christianity. In 1853 Tonga had 109 chapels, 527 local preachers, 7,000 church members, 185 schools with 7,279. When the Wesleyans entered Samoa in 1828, the London Missionary Society was already there, but even in Samoa by the turn of the century the Wesleyan Church was firmly established. The Wesleyans entered Fiji in 1835, and by their Jubilee year in 1885, the Australian historian and missionary, Harold Wood, claimed that ‘there was hardly one Fijian who had not, at least nominally, embraced the Christian faith’. ‘No other country in the world’, continues Wood, ‘has such a high percentage of its indigenous population giving allegiance to the Methodist Church.’ The Wesleyans entered the little island of Rotuma in 1841; thirty years later over two-thirds of the population were Wesleyans. Then, after 1855, the Australian Methodists opened up new areas: in New Britain and New Ireland in 1875, the islands around Papua in 1891, a special mission to Indian indentured labourers in Fiji in 1897, the Solomon Islands in 1902, and most reluctantly, in northern India in 1909.

A pamphlet inserted in an old book on Methodism clearly shows Methodism’s priorities:

**One Century Only!**
**What Christ has done through our Church in One Hundred Years**

In 1820
Throughout the islands of the Pacific we had not a single member of our Church

To-Day [c. 1920]
we have—
154 Native Ministers and Probationers
1,630 Native Catechists and Teachers
4,400 native Local preachers
48,000 native Church members
164,000 Attendants at Public Worship

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Methodism was proud of its record in the Pacific. William Henry Fitchett, Methodist minister, first President of the united Methodist churches in 1902, and writer of immensely popular works like *Deeds that Won the Empire*, compared the story of Methodism in the Pacific to reading a new page in the Acts of the Apostles. With a heavy dose of denominational triumphalism, Fitchett observed that within a hundred and twenty years after Wesley’s death, there existed in Fiji more of his followers than Wesley had gathered in a lifetime, and surely, Fitchett continued, that alone, was ‘proof of the sustained vitality of the Methodist Church’.

Methodism flourished in the Pacific. It was glamorous and successful. And it was dramatic; there were stories of cannibals, converts, martyrs, revivals, and Islander missionaries taking the gospel to other parts of the Pacific—heroic tales that aroused interest and support from the home churches. In comparison Aboriginal missions seemed like ‘stony ground’: few converts, no revivals, no evangelists, not the stuff to inspire enthusiasm in the home churches. In 1907, when the President of the West Australia Conference pleaded with members of the General Conference to start a mission among Aboriginal people in the Kimberley, he was all-too aware that his words may fall on deaf ears because of Methodism’s triumphs in the Pacific: ‘This work’, he said ‘will not have any glamour or romance about it. You will not be able to found a great native Church, or produce results that will excite enthusiasm in missionary audiences. But you can bring a message of hope to a dying race.’

There was an associated problem with Methodism’s success in the Pacific. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century Methodism had overreached itself. Resources were being stretched to the limit. It was not until the 1913 General Conference in Brisbane, with Missionary Centenary Celebrations and the prestige of the veteran missionary, George Brown in the Chair of the General Conference, was there even an attempt to raise funds for an Aboriginal mission. And even then, the General Secretary of the Methodist Mission Board, the Rev. John Wheen, was doubtful that either funds or workers would be forthcoming.

**Mission as atonement**

So with the memory of the failure of early Colonial Aboriginal missions, the widespread belief that the Aboriginal population would become extinct within fifty years, and a church stretched to the limit in the Pacific, why did the Methodist Church eventually establish a mission on Goulburn Island in northern Australia in 1916? My answer to that question is fairly straightforward: it was an act of atonement for their previous neglect and for the wrongs that had happened to the Aboriginal people.

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26 Hilary Carey, “Attempts and Attempts”, p. 51. (‘Interesting’ was the word favoured by Methodist missionaries when endorsing positive results: a warm reception by native people to the arrival of the missionaries, support from colonial authorities or evidence of success of the mission such as baptism, conversion and the appointment of native teachers.)
since European colonisation.

From about the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century, there were huge changes starting to happen in mission theology. The easiest way to understand these changes is to look at what happened at the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910. The Edinburgh conference expressed a new and more positive attitude to other religions; other religions were to be approached with sympathy and respect. ‘Sympathy’ at that time had nothing to do with ‘feeling’ but with ‘understanding’. Other religions were to be studied in order to find the ‘broken lights’ of truth in them.29 Animistic religions, such as that found among Aboriginal people, were to be treated sympathetically and missionaries were reminded that all religions were an attempt to grapple with the great problem of existence. Missionaries were reminded that they were guests, if not intruders, in other people’s country and that all efforts should be taken to be polite and courteous, certainly not contemptuous, overbearing and paternalistic as had been their practice in the past. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, this new sympathetic attitude to people of other religions was starting to filter through to the Methodist Church in Australia.

The Methodist Church was also influenced by the work of Australian anthropologists like Baldwin Spencer and Francis James Gillen who studied the tribes of northern and central Australia and found that Aboriginal people possessed a sophisticated social organisation which supplied clues to much that had become mysterious in the traditions of other races, and also appeared to cast light on the prehistoric state of the human race.30 Through their sympathetic observation and thoroughness, a new respect sprung up for Indigenous people.

A similar thing was happening at a more popular level when people (including Australian schoolchildren) read sketches of Aboriginal life in Jeannie Gunn’s (better known as Mrs Aeneas Gunn) two immensely popular books on Northern Australian life—The Little Black Princess (1905) and We of the Never Never (1908). At a time when Aboriginal people were treated little better than animals, her books express a sympathetic portrayal of Aboriginal life.

This new attitude affected most missions in Australia, including Methodism, but something happened in Methodism in the early decades of the twentieth century that went beyond sympathetic understanding; it was the idea of making reparation or doing atonement. This was not an entirely new idea. A tradition of understanding mission in terms of atonement for the iniquities of the slave trade can be dated from the end of the eighteenth century with people like William Wilberforce, to the German missionary, Albert Schweitzer in the early twentieth century. Schweitzer interpreted his decision to go to Africa as a doctor as atonement for the diseases and destruction that European civilization had brought upon the African people. In his book, On the Edge of the Primeval Forest (1922) Schweitzer writes:

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30 Baldwin and Spencer, The Native Tribes of Inland Australia,
We are not free to confer benefits on these men, or not, as we please; it is our duty. Anything we give them is not benevolence but atonement. For everyone who scattered injury someone ought to go out to take help, and when we have done all that is in our power, we shall not have atoned for the thousandth part of our guilt.\textsuperscript{31}

Strong elements of atonement thinking are evident in Methodism’s decision to establish an Aboriginal mission in northern Australia. It is there in James Watson’s question. It is also clearly expressed in Joseph Bowes’ chapter on ‘The Australian Aborigines’ in \textit{A Century in the Pacific}:

A missionary Church such as [the Methodists]...will not atone for this inexcusable neglect [of Aboriginal people], save by seizing the opportunities now offering, and taking up the work on approved modern lines. Many hearts have been troubled over this neglect during the past few years.\textsuperscript{32}

Atonement thinking also seeps into Harold Wood’s comprehensive history of Australian Methodist missions in the Pacific, suggesting that it had become widespread in the Methodist Church by the early 1970s. Drawing upon Albert Schweitzer, Wood says:

Who can describe the injustice and the cruelties that in the course of centuries they have suffered at the hands of Europeans? Who can measure the misery produced among them by the fiery drinks and the hideous diseases that we have taken to them?...We and our civilization are burdened, really, with a great debt...Anything we give them is not benevolence but atonement.\textsuperscript{33}

\textbf{Legacy for the Uniting Church}

Although many people in the Uniting Church will be shocked and saddened to learn of Methodism’s neglect of Aboriginal people in the second half of the nineteenth century and in the early twentieth, it is important for the Uniting Church to reflect on its past. The Uniting Church has this history with Aboriginal people and it needs to acknowledge it, learn from it, and humbly allow it to transform its theology and behaviour.

It is also important to understand how the past impacts on the present Church, for when the Methodist Church did finally acknowledge its culpability in ignoring the evils of colonialism, racism and the enormous suffering caused to Aboriginal people, it responded by seeking to make atonement for the injustices that European people had imposed upon them. At first its response took the form of attempts to protect Aboriginal people from the effects of white colonialism; later, it took a different form of

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\item[Bowes, ‘The Australian Aborigine’, p. 172.]
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standing alongside Aboriginal people in their endeavour to obtain justice.

It would be a mistake to give the impression that doing atonement was the only way that Methodists responded to the wrongs done to Aboriginal people. However, it is important to appreciate just how much atonement thinking still pervades the Uniting Church’s relationship with Aboriginal people. When four Uniting Church ministers in the early 80s were jailed for participating with Aboriginal people in a last-ditch effort to prevent Amaz Petroleum from mining an identified sacred site at Noonkanbah, that was an act of atonement or ‘at-one-ment’. When the Assembly, led by the President Andrew Dutney and the leader of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, the Rev. Ronang Garrawarra, stood on the steps of the South Australian Parliament in 2012 to protests against the Commonwealth’s Intervention into Aboriginal communities, that was at-one-ment. Dutney made this doubly clear when he commented at the time, ‘The First Peoples are not “them”—they are “us”. Improbably, uncomfortably, but wonderfully we have recognised that we are one body in Christ after all.’ When the new Preamble to the Church’s Constitution interprets the doctrine of the Incarnation as God dwelling in all humanity, that, too, is an expression of atonement.

In seeking to answer the Rev. James Watson’s question—Why had the Methodist Church neglected Aboriginal people for so long?—the Uniting Church is taken into a different world of failure, neglect and atonement—a world which is both past and present. It takes the Church to a place where it recognises its own sin and the sin of others. It also reminds the Church that the very act of viewing humanity with compassion and humility can be a means by which the Church is transformed and God is experienced.