

# **‘THE EMPIRE’S TITANIC STRUGGLE’: VICTORIAN METHODISM AND THE GREAT WAR**

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*This paper examines the response of the Victoria and Tasmania Conference of the Methodist Church to the First World War, with particular reference to the Rev. A. T. Holden, Methodist Chaplain-General to the Commonwealth Military Forces, and President of the Conference in 1915. It argues that the Church’s initial response to the War was restrained and cautious, resisting the demonisation of the enemy, and expressing disapproval of armed conflict between professedly Christian nations as incompatible with the teaching of the New Testament. As the conflict escalated, however, the Church’s discourse shifted toward one more supportive of the British imperial agenda and its ‘struggle against barbarism.’ A. T. Holden was a shaping influence on broader Methodist sentiment in this direction. Methodists made their contribution to the formation of the ANZAC myth with their published reports of the heroism of the Australian soldier and spent much effort ministering to the spiritual and physical needs of military camps. Australian Methodists shared the imperial sentiment common among Australians in the Edwardian period and became willing to make any sacrifices necessary to assist the Empire in its ‘titanic struggle’ against what it considered the forces of barbarism. Among these sacrifices were the more peaceful religious ideals exhibited during the earlier stages of the conflict.*

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## **I. Introduction**

Methodism in Edwardian Australia, along with other Christian Churches, was deeply committed to the cause of empire and thus was implicated in the imperial agenda behind the Great War. The close association between religion and empire is part of Linda Colley’s thesis that Protestantism played an important role in shaping British national identity.<sup>1</sup> By implication it served as a tool

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<sup>1</sup> L. Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994); For a recent collection of articles on the relationship between religion and empire see H. M. Carey, ed., *Empires of Religion* (Basingstoke: Palgrave

for imperial expansion and consolidation. Australian Methodism, still in 1914 part of what Charles Dilke had called 'Greater Britain,' has been seen in this light.<sup>2</sup> Wright and Clancy in their history of Methodism in NSW, for example, refer to Methodists as 'imperialists to the core, and unlikely to do other than support Britain in its hour of need. Loyalty came naturally to them, at least partly because of the perceived link between Empire and Gospel.'<sup>3</sup> Michael McKernan has argued that, along with other Protestant Churches, Methodists functioned as propagandists for the British imperial crusade, closely identifying the cause of Christianity with the aims of the Empire, and offering only 'a glib, superficial response to a catastrophe of overwhelming proportions.'<sup>4</sup> This paper will address such claims and, without rejecting them outright, argue that a more nuanced view of Methodist response to the Great War is needed.

Focusing primarily on the response of the Victoria and Tasmania Conference to the War, I will show that Methodists considered war among ostensibly Christian nations as particularly abhorrent, and resisted the demonisation of 'the enemy' offering somewhat reluctant support for the War especially in its early stages. Only as the conflict escalated, and it became clear that the War would last much longer than at first anticipated, did the Church's early statements regarding the incompatibility of Christian faith with aggressive militarism harden into a grim determination to win the War at all costs. An earlier 'deep-seated horror' of war was replaced by what Sister Faith of the Collingwood Mission called 'a more deeply-seated Empire love.'<sup>5</sup>

Since the 1980s several historians have presented a picture of Australia's involvement in the Great War as very much in Australia's best interest, counteracting an earlier more radical view that

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Macmillan, 2008); see also H. M. Carey, *God's Empire: Religion and Colonialism in the British World c. 1801-1908* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> C. W. Dilke, *Greater Britain: A Record of Travel in English-Speaking Countries during 1866 and 1867* (London, 1868); D. Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> D. Wright and E. G. Clancy, *The Methodists: A History of Methodism in New South Wales* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 130-31. See also A. D. Hunt, *Methodist Militant: Attitudes to the Great War 1914-1918* (Adelaide: South Australian Methodist Historical Society, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> M. McKernan, *Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and Activities of the Major Churches, 1914-1918* (Sydney and Canberra: Catholic Theological Faculty and Australian War Memorial, 1980), 172. See also the review of this work by Neville Meaney in *Journal of Religious History* 11:2 (Dec 1980): 356-59.

<sup>5</sup> *Spectator* (14 August 1914): 1315.

Australians were pawns in an essentially European conflict in which Australians should have had no part.<sup>6</sup> Bongiorno and Mansfield have argued that these historians have focused too much on the diplomatic and political features of Australia's involvement and that there was in fact much greater complexity and ambiguity in Australians' attitudes toward the War.<sup>7</sup> Specifically religious studies such as that presented here help to inform this conversation. Alongside of political, economic, and diplomatic reasons for engagement in such conflicts there are religious views to be considered. Did Australian Methodists of the period allow their religious convictions to control their approach to the War or were such convictions sublimated to the more prosaic practicalities of the situation? Were the churches simply tools of empire or did they have a voice of their own? As Andrew Eason has recently shown in the case of the Salvation Army's earliest work in Cape Town, one should not jump to rapid conclusions about the roles that religion played in colonial, or for that matter post-colonial, settings. Even a military uniform reminiscent of colonial rule could clothe a radical revivalism out of step with colonial authorities.<sup>8</sup> Edwardian Methodists shared in the wider 'Nonconformist conscience'<sup>9</sup> that was profoundly aware of the responsibility of ethical thought and action and the range of possible responses that a thoughtful Christian might make to such a crisis as war in Europe.

This research is based mainly on consulting the weekly Methodist newspaper *The Spectator* and the Annual Conference Minutes from 1914-1918, as well as archival materials relating to the Rev. Albert Thomas Holden.<sup>10</sup> Holden, a veteran of the South African War, and a man proud of his military connections,

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<sup>6</sup> Frank Bongiorno and Grant Mansfield, 'Whose War Was It Anyway?: Some Australian Historians and the Great War,' *History Compass* 6:1 (January 2008): 62-90.

<sup>7</sup> Frank Bongiorno and Grant Mansfield, Teaching and Learning Guide for 'Whose War Was It Anyway?' [http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/history/article\\_view?parent=section&last\\_results=section%3Dhico-australasia-and-pacific&sortby=date&section=hico-australasia-and-pacific&browse\\_id=hico\\_tr\\_bpl578&article\\_id=hico\\_tr\\_bpl578](http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/history/article_view?parent=section&last_results=section%3Dhico-australasia-and-pacific&sortby=date&section=hico-australasia-and-pacific&browse_id=hico_tr_bpl578&article_id=hico_tr_bpl578) accessed 17.01.10

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Eason, "Desperate Fighting at the Cape": The Salvation Army's Arrival and Earliest Work in Late-Victorian Cape Town,' *Journal of Religious History* 33:3 (September 2009): 265-284.

<sup>9</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience: Chapel and Politics, 1870-1914* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> I am very grateful to Professor Ian Breward and his diligent staff at the Uniting Church Victorian and Tasmanian Synod Archives in Elsternwick, Victoria for the wonderful assistance they have given during the research for this paper.

articulated a strong stance in support of the Empire's 'righteous cause.' As President of the Conference during the first full year of the War and Methodist Chaplain-General to the Commonwealth Military Forces, he was able to influence Methodists toward a more full blooded support for 'the Empire's titanic struggle.'<sup>11</sup>

## II. Edwardian Methodist Attitudes to War

In the years leading up to the First World War, the Methodist Church of Australasia was by no means universally supportive of imperial military conflicts. The NSW Methodist newspaper *Glad Tidings* led opposition to the Australian government's attempts, in 1911, to enforce compulsory military training on young men. The 'lust for war' was something 'heathenish' and conscription would only force young men into the danger of moral corruption brought on by camp life.<sup>12</sup>

When the War finally did come, Methodism took a perhaps inevitable stance in support of the imperial programme, though this support was neither immediate nor unqualified, as we shall see. The 1914 NSW Conference called upon Methodists to defend the Empire, and at the same time pray for the soon coming of the Prince of Peace.<sup>13</sup> The Victoria and Tasmania Conference took an identical stance and the Rev. John Thomas, President of the Conference, called the Church to prayer in a series of special meetings set up for the purpose.<sup>14</sup> Such calls for concerts of prayer were, of course, duplicating at the Conference level the call sent out by the President-General, the Rev. George Brown, for weekly Sunday evening services of intercession in each church, and a daily noontide prayer vigil.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> The phrase, 'titanic struggle' appears numerous times in the pages of *The Spectator*, as well as in the Victoria and Tasmania Conference Minutes during the war years. See The Pastoral Addresses for 1915, A. T. Holden, president, Alfred Madsen, secretary Minutes (1915): 36; Samuel Scholes, President, Henry Worrall, Secretary, Minutes (1917): 36, and Henry Worrall, President, A. E. Albiston, Secretary, Minutes (1918): 38. The phrase appears in *The Spectator* frequently, including 10 March 1916: 309; 24 March 1916: 367; 5 May 1916: 575.

<sup>12</sup> D. Wright and E. G. Clancy, *The Methodists: A History of Methodism in New South Wales* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 129-30.

<sup>13</sup> Wright and Clancy, 130-31.

<sup>14</sup> *Spectator* (21 August 1914): 1343.

<sup>15</sup> A. D. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven: A History of Methodism in South Australia* (Adelaide: Lutheran Publishing House, 1985), 275. Chapter 10, 'Methodism Militant' deals extensively with South Australian Methodist response to the Great War.

Victorian and Tasmanian Methodists certainly played their part in the sacrifices made during wartime. By 1916, over 25% of Methodist Home Missioners in Victoria and Tasmania had enlisted and this was being felt as a shortage of workers on the home front.<sup>16</sup> By March 1916, nine ministers had enlisted and ten divinity students from Queens College.<sup>17</sup> In the archives of the Queen's College Memorial Chapel 1,430 names and service records of those who fell are recorded. These include nine ministers and probationers, who enlisted as privates, and did not survive the War. Thirty-one of the ministers present at the Victoria and Tasmania Conference in 1935 had served in various branches of the AIF during the War.<sup>18</sup> Thirty of the 213 names on the Queen's College Roll of Honour, lost their lives and 160 of the 1,016 names on the Wesley College Honour Roll. The honour roll of the Methodist Ladies College, remembers the nursing service of eighteen 'old girls.' Wesley Church in Lonsdale Street, Melbourne, has three memorial windows; one to Victorian chaplains, one to the sons of Methodist ministers who died during the war and one to the Methodist soldiers of Victoria. Numerous Uniting churches throughout the State of Victoria contain memorials to fallen Methodists.

Even while expressing abhorrence of war *The Spectator* acquiesced somewhat weakly, '...we may assume that the British Cabinet would not have decided upon its course of action without some strong reason.'<sup>19</sup>

Britain's participation in the great war [*sic*] is a call to loyalty and prayer on the part of all her people. It seems that we may now be committed to a part in the struggle, which will cost huge sacrifices. May God, who has been our shield and defence in past days, still guard our shores, direct our destinies, and cause the awful ordeal through which we are called to pass to work out in some way the advancement of His Kingdom and the lasting interests of mankind. God save the King.<sup>20</sup>

'War Maps of Europe' were soon being sold through the Methodist Book Depot, providing 'every home exact geographical information relative to those places about which the tides of the

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<sup>16</sup> 'President's retiring address,' *Spectator* (10 March 1916): 298.

<sup>17</sup> 'President's retiring address,' *Spectator* (10 March 1916): 301.

<sup>18</sup> E. Nye, 'The Church in Time of War,' in C. Irving Benson, *A Century of Victorian Methodism* (Melbourne: Spectator Publishing Company, 1935), 361.

<sup>19</sup> 'Current Topics,' *Spectator* (14 August 1914): 1295.

<sup>20</sup> 'Britain and the War,' *Spectator* (2 August 1914): 1268.

present woful [sic] war ebb and flow, price one shilling, post free.’<sup>21</sup> One paperboy selling *The Herald* could only see the upside of the War in increased sales, happily declaring, ‘I’ll make me forchern [sic] if the war goes on!’<sup>22</sup>

Imperial rhetoric can be read with a jaundiced eye by the modern reader but it should not disguise the fact that, at least in its early stages, Methodists only offered qualified and cautious support for the War. There was a strong expression of Christian opposition to war in principle. *The Spectator* for 7 August 1914 expressed its concern in the following way.

The terrible and unprecedented situation in Europe naturally fills the minds of men with alarm. As Christians, we are bound to deprecate the appeal to wholesale bloodshed as a means of settling disputes among civilised nations professing, as they do, a common Christian faith...we know that when the war-drum throbs, the passions of men boil over, and reason and Christian principle, for the time being, are set aside. But as a famous statesman once rightly said [at] the declaration of war: ‘They ring their bells now; they will wring their hands soon.’<sup>23</sup>

A week later the sentiment remained the same. ‘There is little glory in war. At best it is a thing of horror, and its awful effects will soon be revealed.’<sup>24</sup> A woman’s perspective may be gained from ‘Sister Faith’ of the Collingwood Methodist Mission reporting on ‘The Great Shadow of the War.’

Everyone realises how they have lived practically believing such carnage to be impossible in this age, and that the hydra-headed war dragons could never be loosed by professedly Christian nations...there is no boasting, no triumphant expression when any news of so-called victory is proclaimed, only a deep-seated horror, and a more deeply-seated Empire love.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly Britain and its allies were not to be seen as entirely innocent in the affair. The War could be seen as an expression of

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<sup>21</sup> *Spectator* (14 August 1914): 1314.

<sup>22</sup> *Spectator* (14 August 1914), 1315.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Current Topics: Though War Should Rise Against Me,’ *Spectator* (7 August 1914): 1272. The reference is to Sir Robert Walpole, often thought of as the first British ‘Prime Minister’ though that office technically did not exist during his work as British statesman under George I and George II. He uttered these words when war was declared on Spain in 1739.

<sup>24</sup> ‘Current Topics,’ *Spectator* (14 August 1914): 1295.

<sup>25</sup> *Spectator* (14 August 1914): 1315.

God's chastisement upon them just as much as upon their enemies. Britain could be seen as responsible for the opium traffic in China. Russia had 'sinned grievously against the Jewish people.' Belgium had 'a shameful record in connection with the Congo atrocities...who knows but that these are some of the bills that are now being presented for payment.'<sup>26</sup>

In South Australia, Albert Morris argued in an address at Quorn in November 1915 for the 'Neutrality of God.' Without rejecting the legitimacy of the War itself he could not accept that God took sides in it. He asked his hearers to look into their hearts and ask themselves whether they really expected God to intervene in their cause. Were they not, rather, 'relying...on the army and navy for victory'?<sup>27</sup>

In late August 1914, a columnist in *The Spectator* expressed shame regarding the Empire's militaristic agenda.

No one can be proud of this war. It expresses the rule of brute force, and each side has entered upon it confident, because of its alliances, of its power to crush the other. It represents the appeal, not to reason, but to might. It is something to make one hang the head in unspeakable shame.<sup>28</sup>

Upon noting the irony of the members of the two Methodist conferences of Germany praying for victory for their Fatherland, while Methodists on the British side prayed in turn for its annihilation, the article concludes, 'War is a hateful thing. It is only with extremist difficulty that it can ever be justified from the New Testament...'<sup>29</sup>

Even as late in the conflict as 1918, Henry Worrall, President of the Conference expressed the view in his Pastoral Address that 'Civilisation without Christianity at the back of it is a failure, and today we are faced with the sad spectacle of Christian nations bleeding to death.'<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> 'R. K.', 'Judgement and Chastening,' *Spectator* (21 August 1914): 1345.

<sup>27</sup> *Australian Christian Commonwealth* (12 November 1915), cited in Hunt, *This Side of Heaven*, 279-80.

<sup>28</sup> 'Current Topics,' *Spectator* (28 August 1914): 1367.

<sup>29</sup> 'Current Topics,' *Spectator* (28 August 1914): 1367.

<sup>30</sup> H. Worrall, President, A. E. Albiston, Secretary, 'Pastoral Address,' *The Methodist Church of Australasia Victorian and Tasmanian Conference Minutes of the 17th Annual Conference. Begun in Wesley Church Melbourne, Monday 28th of February, 1918* (Melbourne: Methodist Conference Offices, Lonsdale Street, 1918), 36.

While many in the wider community took the view that the Germans were by nature more barbarous and vicious than the British peoples, *The Spectator*, in September 1914, would have none of such racial stereotyping and even turned the spotlight on the potential for evil acts on the part of the Australian soldier.<sup>31</sup> Rumours about the alleged cruelty of Germans in particular were dismissed as ‘common in all wars.’

They were repeatedly and loudly made concerning our own troops in South Africa, and we hear only one side in all such matters...We may expect that in some instances, where millions of men are engaged, there will be unnatural ferocity. We may hope, even concerning an enemy nation, that such incidents, shocking as they are, do not represent the average soldier, but are abnormalities. But the war itself is unnatural. It is grotesque. No greater satire is imaginable after all our talk of civilisation and culture.<sup>32</sup>

Germans in Australia were even defended, in August 1914, as worthies to be honoured as members of a great nation. *The Spectator* cited with approval the story in one of the daily newspapers of The Science Congress having described Professor Johannes Walther, German geologist, as ‘a worthy son of the great nation which has done so much to add to the sum of human knowledge...This kind of conduct toward a stranger within our gates is very different from that hooliganism, which has expressed itself in various quarters. It is certainly nearer the ideal of the New Testament - an ideal all too readily laid aside by some professing Christians when the lust of war is on them.’<sup>33</sup> Sympathy toward individual Germans was one thing. Political expediency was another, as is clear in the insistence of South Australian Methodists in 1914 that German colonial possessions in the Pacific should be seized and secured for Australia immediately, before they could become the site of further French colonial presence.<sup>34</sup>

For all this, there was something inevitable about eventual wholehearted support, on the part of Methodists, for the Empire’s military goals during the Great War. There was no pacifist stance taken in the Victoria and Tasmania Conference and conscientious

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<sup>31</sup> Though it is difficult to say whether the term ‘our own troops’ in the quote that follows is a reference to the Australian soldier or to the British soldier, inclusive of Australians.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Current Topics,’ *Spectator* (4 September 1914): 1403.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Current Topics,’ *Spectator* (21 August 1914): 1331.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Current Topics: Dividing the Spoil,’ *Spectator* (21 August 1914): 1331.



objectors do not appear in the records I have consulted. There was nothing to match the remarkable stand taken by B. Linden Webb in the rural NSW town of Hay, who preached three pacifist sermons from January to March 1915, and published these as a pamphlet - *The Religious Significance of the War*.<sup>35</sup> In it he took exception, not just to the present war but to all wars on the basis that such were contrary to the Sermon on the Mount. The pamphlet caused quite a stir and received negative responses in both *The Methodist* and *Glad Tidings*. Webb must have been greatly encouraged by the support he received from his local church officers even though not all agreed with his stance. Nevertheless, he was made to feel that he should resign from the ministry, but was persuaded to be listed as 'without pastoral charge,' and later returned to active service in the Church.<sup>36</sup> Webb is probably the outstanding Methodist representative of what Robert Linder refers to as 'the little cluster of Word War I doves' - the 'peaceful evangelicals' opposed to the Great War on pacifist grounds.<sup>37</sup> Linder sees Australian Methodists as 'in many ways the most questioning of the war while at the same time the most giving of their sons to the god of battle.'<sup>38</sup>

During a visit to Britain in 1918, A. T. Holden reported without censure that the Primitive Methodist Conference of that year sent greetings to its imprisoned conscientious objectors, as well as to its serving troops, evidence perhaps of the more radical politics that could be found among Primitives. One delegate to the Conference refused to accept the presentation of an address to the King, protesting that he only acknowledged one king, Jesus Christ. Four or five others joined in voting against the motion.<sup>39</sup> But the voices of pacifism and conscientious objection remained in the minority, and the Australian situation seems to have mirrored the British experience where, according to Michael Hughes, initial hesitation about the War on the part of Methodists was soon displaced by

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<sup>35</sup> B. L. Webb, *The Religious Significance of the War* (Sydney: Christian World, 1915).

<sup>36</sup> R. D. Linder, 'The Peaceful Evangelicals: Refusing to Take up the Sword, 1914-1918,' *Lucas* 33-34 (June and December 2003): 5-65, esp. 23-34 covering Methodism. See also R. D. Linder, *The Long Tragedy: Australian Evangelical Christians and the Great War* (Adelaide: Open Book, 2000). For a broader treatment of general attitude toward the Great War on the part of the Churches see Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and Activities of the Major Churches 1914-18* (Sydney and Canberra: Catholic Theological Faculty and Australian War Memorial, 1980).

<sup>37</sup> Linder, 'The Peaceful Evangelicals,' 5-6.

<sup>38</sup> Linder, 'The Peaceful Evangelicals,' 23.

<sup>39</sup> *Spectator* (14 August 1918): 798-99.

enthusiastic support.<sup>40</sup> Voices calling for peace were soon to be lost in the much louder sonic boom of Empire loyalty.

### **III. The Influence of A. T. Holden on Methodist Sentiment**

A.T. Holden, President of the Victoria and Tasmania Conference in the first full year of the War, did much to encourage a more stridently imperial sentiment among Methodists. Affectionately known as 'Major' and later 'Colonel,' Holden was a veteran of the South African War, having accompanied the Fourth Contingent of Imperial Bushmen to that conflict in May of 1900 and receiving the Queen's and King's medals for his service there.<sup>41</sup> He was an imperial figure if ever there was one.<sup>42</sup> Given his military chaplaincy background and his appointment as Methodist Chaplain-General to the Commonwealth Military Forces with responsibility for nominating Methodist chaplains to serve with the AIF, it is not surprising that Holden should take a very strong stand in support of the Empire's cause during the Great War.

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<sup>40</sup> David Bebbington, review of Michael Hughes, *Conscience and Conflict: Methodism, Peace and War in the Twentieth Century* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2008) in *English Historical Review* 508 (June 2009): 750-752.

<sup>41</sup> Rentoul and Cain, in Benson, 184. He succeeded Edward Bickford as Superintendent of Home Missions in 1904 after having served as his assistant, and went on to travel great distances through the Mallee by horse and buggy. J. C. Lawton, 'The Romance and Realism of Circuit Life,' in Benson, 162-63. Following the War, during Holden's leadership of Home Missions he established both the Home Missioners Training College (1925) and the Federal Methodist Inland Mission (1926), two important agencies for the spread of the Gospel.

<sup>42</sup> Basic biographical data on Holden is found in I. F. McLaren, 'Holden, Albert Thomas (1866 - 1935),' *Australian Dictionary of Biography* vol. 9 (Melbourne University Press, 1983), 327-328. Rentoul and Cain in their contribution to Irving Benson's centennial history of Victorian Methodism listed Holden along with John Watford and Edward S. Bickford as holding 'an abiding place amongst the great determining forces that moulded the life of [the Methodist] Church in Victoria...' and 'one of the greatest personalities that God has given to Methodism, and indeed to Australia.' T. C. Rentoul and J. H. Cain, 'The Home Mission Enterprise,' in Benson, 181, 183. In addition to serving as President of the Victoria and Tasmania Conference in 1915, he was in 1932 elected President General of the Methodist Conference. When the various branches of British Methodism united in that same year, Holden was present in London to represent the Australasian Church, and received the Freedom of the City of London. The University of Toronto conferred an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree upon him in 1934. He was stricken with cancer and died in Melbourne in 1935, the funeral being held at Wesley Church in Lonsdale Street.

In his Pastoral Address to the 1915 Conference Holden gave a number of justifications for involvement in the War. The 'far-flung portions of the Empire [had] rallied to the old flag, because of the issue of public righteousness involved in this titanic struggle.'<sup>43</sup> The 'public righteousness' referred to here was the need to defend the neutrality of Belgium as previously agreed to by both Germany and Britain. The dominions must now in solidarity with 'the motherland...pay the price of keeping our pledged word.'<sup>44</sup> This 'pledged word' had been formally given in Article 7 of the 1839 *Treaty of London* guaranteeing Belgian neutrality. The German plan was to invade Belgium so as to reach Paris in the early weeks of the conflict. Germany's request to the British government in August 1914 to disregard the 'scrap of paper' committing Britain to the defence of Belgium was refused and when the Germans entered Belgium regardless, Britain felt obligated to enter the War.<sup>45</sup>

In his President's Retiring Address in 1916, Holden expressed his view that 'it was morally impossible for a nation with our obligations to remain neutral, while Belgium was being ravaged and France and Russia imperilled, and the gains of Christianity and civilisation jeopardised by a despotic ambition.'<sup>46</sup> Holden saw the War as an expression of 'two ideals in conflict, the British ideal of freedom, and the Teutonic idea of the State as the summit of everything, coercion applied all round, and everybody forced to a given purpose.'<sup>47</sup> Peace could not be accepted without total victory over what Sir Oliver Lodge called 'the deification of force and materialism represented by German ambitions of conquest.'<sup>48</sup> The 1916 Conference expressed its conviction that 'Great Britain and her allies are fighting for a cause that is pre-eminently a righteous one, as it is being waged against forces which are inimical to the liberties and welfare of the world at large.'<sup>49</sup>

Holden spoke of W. H. Fitchett, whose *Deeds that Won the Empire* contained stirring 'Boy's Own' adventure stores of imperial derring-do, as having 'strengthened imperial sentiment and fervour

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<sup>43</sup> 'Annual Pastoral Address,' Minutes (1915): 36.

<sup>44</sup> 'Annual Pastoral Address,' Minutes (1915): 36.

<sup>45</sup> 'Primary Documents – Treaty of London 1839,' *First World War.com: A Multimedia History of World War One*  
<http://www.firstworldwar.com/source/london1839.htm> accessed 3 July 2010.

<sup>46</sup> 'President's retiring address,' *Spectator* (10 March 1916): 300.

<sup>47</sup> 'President's retiring address,' *Spectator* (10 March 1916): 300.

<sup>48</sup> 'President's retiring address,' *Spectator* (10 March 1916): 300.

<sup>49</sup> Minutes (1916): 80.

in all parts of the empire.’<sup>50</sup> Addressing the congregation at a memorial service at Wesley Church, Melbourne, on Wednesday 8 March 1916, Holden spoke of how ‘our boys, with the instinct of the true Britisher, can lay down their lives.’ By this stage 271 Victorian Methodists had already done so.<sup>51</sup> Of course this kind of discourse was not unique to Holden. Prime Minister Billy Hughes gave an address on ‘The Call of Empire’ at a Pleasant Sunday Afternoon gathering at Wesley Church on the 4th of February 1917.<sup>52</sup> Lengthy letters appeared in *The Spectator*, from chaplains on the field to Holden as Chaplain-General. One such, in October 1915, from Colonel James Alexandria expressed the view that ‘When our men get out here and see and understand the Empire’s situation, they become the last word as British Imperialists.’<sup>53</sup> In his 1918 Pastoral Address, Henry Worrall, President of the Conference, referred to his constituents as ‘Methodist citizens of this outer ward of the Empire.’<sup>54</sup>

In 1916, aware of the massive scale of casualties already suffered, Holden called for more troops and argued for conscription to fill up the numbers. In his President’s retiring address that year he estimated that there were still 600,000 men in Australia of military age. ‘Personally, I have been opposed to conscription, but if young married men, fit and free but unwilling hang back, nothing can prevent or withstand the demand for some form of legal obligation...The one thing we have to do is to win the War, to do it decisively and finally, and to do it as soon as possible.’<sup>55</sup> He expressed the same view a month later in his Anzac Day sermon at Wesley Church in Melbourne. ‘How long will crowds of men of military age, apparently fit and free, continue to throng the stadium, race course and sports grounds, for purely selfish pleasure, and do so with no sense of shame? If these latter are not moved by an appeal from higher motives, ought they not to be rounded up with the stockwhip of conscription?’<sup>56</sup> Holden’s views turned out not to

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<sup>50</sup> ‘President’s retiring address,’ *Spectator* (10 March 1916): 297.

<sup>51</sup> *Spectator* (7 April 1916): 442.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Brief Notes,’ *Spectator* (4 February 1917): 152.

<sup>53</sup> Letter to the Chaplain-General from Colonel Chaplain James Alexandria, 8 July 1915 in ‘Echoes of the War,’ *Spectator* (1 October 1915): 1390.

<sup>54</sup> H. Worrall, ‘Pastoral Address,’ Minutes (1918): 38.

<sup>55</sup> ‘President’s retiring address,’ *Spectator* (10 March 1916): 300.

<sup>56</sup> Anzac Day sermon delivered at Wesley Church 30 April, 1916, *Spectator* (5 May 1916): 575.

be reflected in the national sentiment as both referenda on conscription in 1916 and 1917 resulted in a 'no' vote.<sup>57</sup>

Certainly Holden was no warmonger and the horror and tragedy of war was something he knew first hand. But his views were much more reflective of militant imperialism than had been the earlier more cautious statements about the appropriateness of the War in Europe. Given his reputation in Methodism, his platform as Conference President in 1915, and his appointment as Methodist Chaplain-General during wartime it is likely that Holden's view were a shaping influence on broader Methodist sentiment. While Methodists brought a certain reluctance to the support of the War in its early stages on the basis of higher Christian ideals than 'Empire love,' eventually justification for support of the War fell more into line with the practical exigencies and obligations inherent in the imperial political agenda so that when it finally came, the end of the war was seen by Conference President A. E. Albiston, in triumphalist terms, as 'the overthrow of one vast system of iniquity.'<sup>58</sup>

#### IV. Methodist Views of the Australian Soldier

Methodist support for the war effort was intricately connected to the admiration felt for the men who were dying in the trenches and whose efforts were seen in a decidedly heroic manner that resonated with important theological themes such as sacrifice and the laying down of one's life for others. Admiration for the Australian soldier is, of course, a well established part of the Australian national mythos. The digger is usually seen as the epitome of manhood – rugged, brave, and contemptuous of invested authority but willing to die for his mates. C. W. Bean's contributions to the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18* provide the classic description of the typical Australian digger.<sup>59</sup> Though Australians had fought in other British military conflicts, including the Crimean War (1854-1856), the Sudan conflict of 1885, and the South African (or Boer)

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<sup>57</sup> According to Arnold D. Hunt, Methodist opposition to conscription was particularly strong in South Australia. Hunt, *This Side of Heaven*, 291; See also A. D. Hunt and R. P. Thomas, *For God, King and Country: A Study of the Attitudes of the Methodist and Catholic Press in South Australia to the Great War 1914-1918* (Salisbury, SA: Salisbury College of Advanced Education, 1979).

<sup>58</sup> A. E. Albiston, President, R. Ditterich, Secretary, 'Pastoral Address,' *The Methodist Church of Australasia Victorian and Tasmanian Conference Minutes of the 18th Annual Conference. Begun in Wesley Church Melbourne, Monday 19<sup>th</sup> March, 1919* (Melbourne: Methodist Conference Offices, Lonsdale Street, 1919).

<sup>59</sup> The first six volumes.

War of 1895-1902, the mythic ideal of the Australian soldier was not fully drawn until the Gallipoli landing of 1915, often said to be the first engagement fought after Australia became a nation (overlooking the fact that the Boer War did not conclude until 1902). Australians fought in several theatres of war; in France (notably at the Battle of the Somme), in Palestine, where the Light Horsemen liberated Jerusalem from the Turks in 1917, in the Pacific, where Australians captured the German island of Nauru and its communication centre, and at sea near the Cocos Islands, where the *Sydney* sunk the German cruiser the *Emden* in a brief sea battle. But it is Gallipoli which forms the centrepiece of Australia's memory of its contribution, though some, including most recently Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds have challenged the commonly held idea that the nation of Australia was born at Gallipoli, rather than at Federation in 1901.<sup>60</sup> In a similar vein, E.M. Andrews has argued that the idea of the superiority of the Australian soldier over others in the British Imperial Forces was useful for building morale but ultimately an 'illusion'.<sup>61</sup>

Methodist spokesmen certainly made their contribution to the formation of the Anzac myth. Holden spoke of the Gallipoli dead in his Anzac Day sermon delivered at Wesley Church April 30, 1916. 'We now have traditions. With the rich red blood of our noblest sons, we have purchased our place in the councils of the greater British Empire now being begotten in the agonies of war.'<sup>62</sup> The 1916 Conference expressed its admiration for 'the glorious gallantry displayed by our Australian troops at Gallipoli...'<sup>63</sup> In speaking of the Anzac spirit, in 1935, C. Irving Benson, Minister of Wesley Church, Melbourne, at least brought into focus the reality of defeat. 'The story of Anzac is the epic of men who dared an 'impossible' task, and nearly did it. They dared a deed which those who knew said could not be done. They failed, after performing prodigies of valour, and sailed away at last, unsuccessful.'<sup>64</sup>

The pages of *The Spectator* were filled during the War years with stories of gallantry on the part of young diggers. Colonel

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<sup>60</sup> M. Lake and H. Reynolds, eds. *What's Wrong with ANZAC?: The Militarisation of Australian History* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2010.)

<sup>61</sup> E. M. Andrews, *The ANZAC Illusion* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>62</sup> Anzac Day sermon delivered at Wesley Church 30 April, 1916, *The Spectator* (5 May 1916): 575.

<sup>63</sup> Minutes (1916): 81.

<sup>64</sup> Benson, *A Century of Victorian Methodism*, 40.

Chaplain James Alexandria reported in July 1915 that those in attendance at the burial services over which he presided were being shot by snipers, not even the rites of burial being respected by the enemy. He reported finding the body of a 'young lad' lying 'forward and isolated...with his face towards the enemy, his hand still holding the rifle, and he had not a single cartridge left.'<sup>65</sup>

While in England in 1917, A. T. Holden came in contact with an Association that had determined that no Australian soldier would be buried without some Australian being present 'as a mark of honour and respect.'<sup>66</sup> A grave with the inscription 'To an unknown Anzac' was discovered. The Association said, 'We cannot have an unknown Anzac.' The grave was opened, the soldier was identified, and his name and number placed upon the headstone.'<sup>67</sup>

In September 1917, Chaplain Rev. A. H. Mitchell ventured upon a theological reflection on the nature of 'battered manhood.'

If I could violate confidences, I could tell tales of such beauty and horror, and withal so glorious in sustained heroism, as would break a heart of adamant. It is not wise to speak of these things now, but when a lad comes home palsied and shattered, with limbs and speech disjointed, think on these things and tell the fireside theologians and critics that these battered fragments of Australian manhood have been filling up the fullness of the suffering in Christ in their application to the redemption of civilisation.<sup>68</sup>

So great was admiration for the sacrifice of fallen soldiers, some Methodists argued that even those who had lived openly sinful lives might find salvation in their sacrifice for their neighbours. J. B. Carruthers, editor of *The Methodist*, in which such an idea appeared, made no comment, but *Glad Tidings* sought to find a solution to the problem in the idea philosophers have referred to as 'middle knowledge.' Thinking it rash to set aside the doctrine of justification by faith altogether it suggested that God may indeed show mercy to those who *would have* repented if war had not intervened in their lives. The openly godless, could not expect such leniency.<sup>69</sup> Holden's views were more orthodox, writing in March 1916, 'We do not

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<sup>65</sup> Letter to the Chaplain-General from Colonel Chaplain James Alexandria, 8 July 1915 in 'Echoes of the War,' *Spectator* (1 October 1915): 1390.

<sup>66</sup> 'In Memoriam Service: Our Fallen Soldiers,' *Spectator* (28 March 1917): 343.

<sup>67</sup> 'In Memoriam Service: Our Fallen Soldiers,' *Spectator* (28 March 1917): 343.

<sup>68</sup> Chaplain Rev. A. H. Mitchell in a letter to A. T. Holden, 7 Sept 1917, reported in *The Spectator* (5 Dec 1917): 1256.

<sup>69</sup> Wright and Clancy, 133-34.

believe that the death of a soldier can be his own atonement. We are all saved – soldiers and common folk alike – by the mercy of God and not by deeds of righteousness.’<sup>70</sup>

Both at the front and in the camps, Methodists soldiers needed to receive the ministrations of the clergy. Holden celebrated in September 1915, ‘the keen interest...taken in this call of Empire,’ evidenced by the twenty-five Methodist ministers who had volunteered to serve as chaplains, and the many from among the clergy, who volunteered as ordinary soldiers. Of these, two were chosen as the official Methodist chaplains, the Rev James Green, senior Methodist chaplain for NSW and a veteran of the South African War and the Rev A. C. Plane, from Maryborough, Queensland, with nineteen years military chaplaincy experience.<sup>71</sup>

There was much work to be done in military camps at home and abroad and Methodists set about this work with great gusto. By December of 1914, there were 12,000 men camped at Broadmeadows, north of Melbourne, at least 800 of whom were Methodists.<sup>72</sup> Work in military camps was aided by the construction of ‘Institutes and marquees’ at Broadmeadows, Seymour, Ascot Vale, Royal Park and Maribyrnong, all outlying areas in Melbourne’s north. Over £2000 had been spent by March 1916. Apart from chaplaincy allowances and ongoing weekly maintenance costs, Holden intended ‘to undertake all that is necessary and trust to the Methodist people to defray the cost.’<sup>73</sup> He had complained in August 1914 about the regulation that no chaplain should receive any higher than a captain’s pay. If this were a reflection of the minister’s willingness to live frugally, fair enough, but if it was a reflection of the unimportance of their work or of the quality of their service, it would be both unfair and inaccurate.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> A. T. Holden, ‘President’s Retiring Address,’ *Spectator* (10 March 1916): 301.

<sup>71</sup> A. T. Holden, ‘Methodist Chaplains,’ *Spectator* (11 September 1915): 1447. Holden traced Methodist chaplaincy back to Wellington’s troops, who before 1810 fought on the Peninsular without the benefit of the presence of a single clergyman. The Methodist movement saw the arrival of preachers on the field of battle, who organised prayer meetings that Wellington saw as irregular. Instead he called for chaplains to be formally appointed. ‘President’s retiring address,’ *Spectator* (10 March 1916): 300.

<sup>72</sup> *Spectator* (18 December 1914): 1964. A. T. Holden, ‘Methodist Chaplains,’ *Spectator* (11 September 1915): 1447.

<sup>73</sup> ‘President’s retiring address,’ *Spectator* (10 March 1916): 298.

<sup>74</sup> *Spectator* (18 December 1914): 1964.



Retiring collections for Methodist military work were taken up on Empire Sunday, £1000 being reported to the 1916 conference.<sup>75</sup> As would be expected in a conversionist movement such as Methodism, evangelistic work was actively carried out in the camps, and not without some effect. 'Manly decisions for Christ' in the Seymour military camp were reporting in 1916 as having been 'fairly numerous.'<sup>76</sup> In addition to seeking converts, the moral purity of the soldiers needed to be safeguarded. The 1916 Conference resolved to urge military authorities to arrange for lectures at the camps on venereal disease, to be given by medical officers.<sup>77</sup> The 1915 Conference rebuked the State Premier for refusal to lessen hotel trading hours, concerned about the moral danger faced by the soldiers from the 'liquor traffic' and provided Senator Pierce, Minister for Defence, on closing the wet canteen at Broadmeadows and banning such canteens on troopships.<sup>78</sup> As un-Australian as it may seem, opposition to 'shouting' was strong among Methodists, and the government was asked to introduce legislation banning it.<sup>79</sup> Reporting on having lunched with 2,500 Australian soldiers on Christmas Day 1916, Holden commented, no doubt with pleasure albeit naively, 'I never saw one of them in the slightest degree the worse for liquor.'<sup>80</sup>

Of course Methodists were not alone in taking their part in offering religion to the Australian soldier. In addition to Holden, three other Chaplains-General were appointed to oversee chaplaincy throughout the Commonwealth Military Forces - Archbishop Thomas Joseph Carr (Roman Catholic), the Very Reverend Dr Lindsay Rentoul (Presbyterian), and Archbishop Charles Owen Leaver Riley (Anglican).<sup>81</sup> These four left Australia on 11 July 1916 by troopship to visit Australian military facilities, 'camps, depots and hospitals' in England, France and Egypt, to report to the Defence Department on their return early in 1917.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Minutes (1916): 183. For Empire Day, see Gavin Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo: Australia: 1901-1919, The Rise of a Nation* (Sydney: Collins Fontana, 1976): 109-117.

<sup>76</sup> Naval and Military Affairs Committee (Minutes, 1916): 176.

<sup>77</sup> *The Methodist Church of Australasia Victorian and Tasmanian Conference Minutes of the 15th Annual Conference. Begun in Wesley Church Melbourne, Monday 28th of February, 1916* (Melbourne: Methodist Conference Offices, 1916), 79.

<sup>78</sup> Minutes (1915): 83.

<sup>79</sup> Minutes (1916): 80.

<sup>80</sup> *Spectator* (14 March 1917): 286.

<sup>81</sup> *Spectator* (21 July 1916): 926.

<sup>82</sup> *Spectator* (21 July 1916): 926; (28 March 1917): 342.

In a French town, in March 1917, Holden saw the rubble of a bombed out churchyard. In it was a shrine containing a larger-than-life figure of Christ, untouched by the bombardment. On its left shoulder a bird had built its nest, drawing Holden's attention to the hope that many an Australian soldier would find such shelter here in France who, like that bird, had been driven from their homes, but who could find rest in Christ.<sup>83</sup> When visiting hospitals in England, he 'had no time to go through all the wards looking for Australians' so would simply stand in the doorway of a ward and call out, 'Are there any Australian soldiers in this ward?' 'It was quite pathetic to see some poor fellow struggling to lift his hand, in order to let it be known that an Australian was lying there.'<sup>84</sup> One soldier expressed his view from a hospital bed in London that 'the only VC I want to see is the Victorian coast.'<sup>85</sup> According to Senior Chaplain, James Green, writing in April 1917, Holden's visit 'has meant a great deal amid the cold winds of Salisbury Plains, the sloppy chalk mud of the Somme, and the dug-outs and billets where our men have been homesick.'<sup>86</sup>

In addition to his experiences near the front line and in the military hospitals, Holden learned much about the 'mother church' of British Wesleyanism, whose sons had volunteered just as enthusiastically as had their counterparts in the Dominions. By March 1917, over 200,000 British Wesleyans had enlisted and 200 had volunteered as chaplains.<sup>87</sup> Every British Methodist theological institution was closed to enable the student body to proceed to the Front. By 20 July 1917, 15,560 sons of Wesleyan Methodist homes in Britain had died, of whom 830 had been officers.<sup>88</sup>

Upon his return to Australia early in 1917, the Methodist Church decided that Holden should return to London and take charge of chaplaincy work there, £1000 to 'be placed at [his] disposal...to use for the spiritual and social benefits of our Methodist soldiers in England and at the front, to assist the chaplains in any way the Chaplain-General may deem necessary, and to cover all official incidental expenses.'<sup>89</sup> This amount was to be raised by the various

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<sup>83</sup> *Spectator* (14 March 1917): 287.

<sup>84</sup> 'Central Mission Gazette,' *Spectator* (7 March 1917): 273.

<sup>85</sup> 'Central Mission Gazette,' *Spectator* (7 March 1917): 273.

<sup>86</sup> 'War News and Notes,' *Spectator* (18 April 1917): 423.

<sup>87</sup> *Spectator* (14 March 1917): 286.

<sup>88</sup> A. T. Holden, 'Our Chaplains at the Front,' *Spectator* (12 Sept 1917), 958.

<sup>89</sup> Nye, 359. This decision appears in the 1918 Annual Conference Minutes as part of the report of the Naval and Military Affairs Committee, Minutes (1918): 206.

State conferences with Victoria being asked to raise £320. Methodist Ladies College, Hawthorn alone raised £600 from a garden fete held on its grounds. Holden returned to England and took up this work with great vigour, his major project being to raise money for the construction of a Mission Headquarters on Horseferry Road, to serve Methodist soldiers, in partnership with the YMCA. It was in operation by Christmas 1918; but by then the War was over.<sup>90</sup>

The admiration for and ministrations toward the Australian soldier typified by Holden, but widely held by Australian Methodists of the period, almost necessitated the adoption of a more militant and imperialistic outlook. The idea that such brave and noble examples of Australian manhood were dying for an empty or questionable cause would have been unthinkable. In such a context pacifist voices, even if their stance is drawn from a profoundly religious conviction, are all too readily seen as unpatriotic, perhaps even seditious. That a community as conversionist as Methodism could suggest that the fallen soldier might receive salvation regardless of his lack of personal religious experience or belief, is indicative of how readily a faith community can allow prevailing cultural values to trump the inner logic of its own creed. It is a good example of how complex were religious responses to the Great War. Methodism, like all of the Christian churches in Australia, emerged from a colonial situation in which support for Britain's military agenda seemed natural, even in the post-colonial setting. The response of religious people should not, however, be lost in the assumption that the churches were simply tools of Empire, or that the clergy were its unthinking agents. Michael Gladwin has warned against the tendency of historians selectively to use evidence and failing to consider context, in presenting the unflattering views of the colonial clergymen that have resulted in the prevailing 'flogging parson' tradition.<sup>91</sup> The warning is pertinent also in studies of post-colonial clergy.

## **V. Conclusion**

In the early stages of the Great War, the Victoria and Tasmania Conference expressed horror and revulsion at the prospect of

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<sup>90</sup> *Spectator* (6 Nov 1918): 1091.

<sup>91</sup> M. Gladwin, 'Flogging Parsons?: Australian Anglican Clergymen, the Magistracy and Convicts, 1788-1850,' *Journal of Religious History* 36:3 (Sept 2012): 386-403.

Christian nations at war with each other in Europe. It was seen as a thing of horror and shame, unjustifiable on the basis of the teachings of the New Testament. Methodist Church leaders generally upheld the Christian preference for peace over war, so that the onset of hostilities in Europe led to some ambivalence in the Church's early pronouncements. Britain and its allies were seen as bearing some of the blame for the present crisis as a result of former unjust actions for which God was now seen to be calling them to account. Bigotry towards Germans on account of their nationality was a thing not to be countenanced and Germany was still seen as a great, educated, cultured and Christian nation. Men on both sides of a conflict, and not only the enemy soldiers, were seen as capable of behaving badly during the madness of war. Though there is evidence of some support for pacifism and conscientious objection, neither of these views ever exceeded the status of a minority viewpoint. The War was seen by Methodists as a just one, fought in a righteous cause. Britain had pledged itself to defend the neutrality of Belgium and it must now make good on its word. It was a matter of honour. Two types of civilization were in conflict and the German military aggression that represented the power of the State must be met with the strongest possible defensive response on the part of Britain and its allies, in the cause of freedom.

The Australian soldier was seen as fighting bravely and well and Methodists played their part in the formation of the Anzac myth. Theological reflection on fallen soldiers even included the conjecture that death in the trenches was a kind of martyrdom guaranteeing salvation, though this never replaced the more orthodox demand for a personal conversion. Opportunities were given to present the claims of Christ to the unconverted soldier, so that his salvation in the next life could be assured. In addition to the offering of regular religious services and personal contact with chaplains, support for the troops was also expressed in attempts to safeguard his moral purity. This included campaigning to ban 'wet canteens' and efforts to stop the spread of venereal disease.

As the conflict escalated, and it became clear that the War would last much longer than at first anticipated, the Church's early statements regarding the incompatibility of Christian faith with aggressive militarism hardened into a grim determination to win the War at all costs. The influence on this trajectory in sentiment of A. T. Holden, already a much loved and respected Methodist, was

significant given his roles as decorated veteran, Conference President, and Chaplain-General. Australian Methodists shared the 'Empire love' typical of Australians in the Edwardian period and became willing to make any sacrifices necessary to assist the Empire in its 'titanic struggle' against what it considered the forces of barbarism. Among these sacrifices, it appears, were the more peaceful religious ideals exhibited during the earlier stages of the conflict.