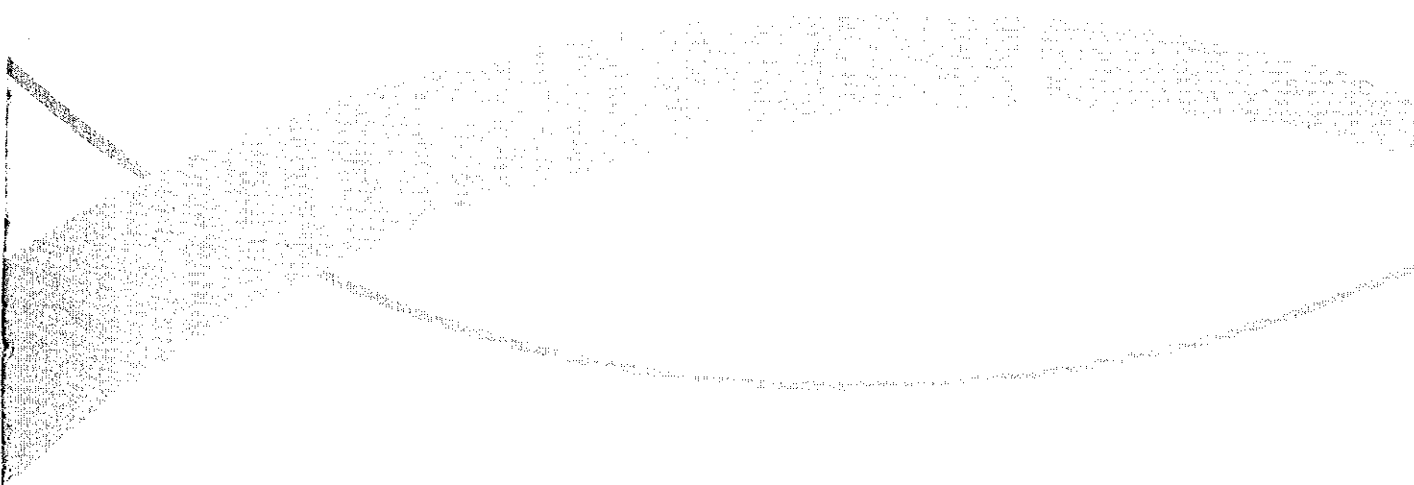


**UNITING CHURCH STUDIES**  
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**ENGAGING THE BASIS**

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## UNITING CHURCH STUDIES

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# The Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia

*Glen O'Brien*

During the World Methodist Conference of 1951, John Scott Lidgett, 97 year-old patriarch of British Methodism, preached at the University Church, Oxford and passed out afterwards from sheer exhaustion. Adrian Hastings, a wry Catholic observer commented, 'Methodism had arrived—was it also about to pass away?'<sup>1</sup> Many assume that Australian Methodism 'passed away' in 1977 with the formation of the Uniting Church. For some this is cause for regret, while others see the merging of the Methodist Church into the Uniting Church as a fruitful expression of its 'catholic spirit'. It is less known that a smaller Methodist body, which held its first official Conference in 1947, continues to exist in Australia, with eighty-two congregations in four Districts situated in five states. The Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia, a member church of the World Methodist Council, is a small but vigorous denomination in the Evangelical and Wesleyan–Holiness tradition. In 2010 it reported a total membership of 2,075 and an average Sunday morning attendance of 3,418.<sup>2</sup>

It is sometimes mistakenly assumed that Wesleyan Methodists are 'continuing Methodists' who chose to stay out of the union that formed the Uniting Church in 1977, just as there are 'continuing' Presbyterians and 'continuing' Congregationalists. This is not the case as the Wesleyan Methodists were not part of the discussions leading to union. Some former Methodists did transfer to the Wesleyan Methodist Church after 1977, but not in large numbers. Its origin lies in connections between RAAF chaplain, the Rev. Kingsley Ridgway, and the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America in the immediate post-Second World War period. The Church may be seen both as a new religious movement, emerging out of the post-war context of greater engagement between Australians and Americans and at the same time as a continuation of the long-standing holiness and revivalist strain within Australian evangelicalism.

Growing from a very small base with little numerical growth over its first thirty years, the 'Australia District' had seen sufficient growth by 1982 to be divided into three Districts—New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland. Today the four districts comprise New South Wales,<sup>3</sup> the Southern District (Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia),<sup>4</sup> the South Queensland District (south

<sup>1</sup> Alan Tuberfield, *John Scott Lidgett: Archbishop of British Methodism?*, London, Epworth Press, 2003, p. xi.

<sup>2</sup> Information provided on 22 March 2011 by National Statistician Heidi Wright. This shows a slight decrease from the 2007 figures which were 2,093 total members and an average attendance of 3,481. Information provided on 2 March 2011 by the Rev. Peter Dobson, former Assistant National Superintendent.

<sup>3</sup> Thirteen congregations including one in Canberra.

<sup>4</sup> Presently comprising Victoria, twenty-one congregations, South Australia, one congregation and Western Australia, five congregations.

of Rockhampton)<sup>5</sup> and the North Queensland District<sup>6</sup> with a total of eighty-two congregations. In addition, missionary work is supported in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, in Bougainville (PNG's North Solomons Province), in the Solomon Islands and in Mozambique.<sup>7</sup>

This article will provide an introduction to the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia, by providing a brief sketch of its history, and describing the changes it has experienced over time as well as some of its present characteristics. It will utilise the 'sect-church' typology to trace the development of the Church over time. Sociologists have utilised one or other version of this typology in order to place religious groups in perspective and to demonstrate a movement on the part of many groups from their initial beginnings as sects to their development as denominations and churches.<sup>8</sup> The word 'sect' is sometimes used as the rough equivalent of 'cult' but religious sociologists do not use it in this way. A cult usually espouses aberrant religious beliefs and behaviour, whereas sects are more typically renewal movements that harken back to a forgotten orthodoxy. Sects are seen as 'innovative, and unstable, tending to develop into churches over time.'<sup>9</sup> Where 'churches' are world affirming, 'sects' tend to be world rejecting and to have precise definitions of church membership, being very clear about who is and who is not a member, and keeping clear tabs on gains and losses. Those on the church end of the scale are less definitive and less careful with tabulating gains and losses.<sup>10</sup> Denominations now considered churches in their own right, such as Methodists, Baptists, and the Churches of Christ, all began as sects and, over a process of time, have 'moderated their exclusive ideas about the world, softened their membership requirements, and have accepted other denominations as relative equals.'<sup>11</sup> In just the same way, the Wesleyan-Holiness churches with origins in the nineteenth-century holiness movement, began as sects (in the sociological sense) with very high demands placed upon their members but over time have gradually moderated their expectations becoming more like the established denominations in the process.

## Background and ecclesial context of the Wesleyan Methodist Church

Kingsley Ridgway, the principal catalyst and recognised founder of the denomination sought to establish a more revivalist Methodist church in Australia that would bear the features of the North

<sup>5</sup> Thirty-three congregations.

<sup>6</sup> Established in 1993 by a division of the Queensland District—nine congregations stretching north from Rockhampton to Cairns.

<sup>7</sup> 'About the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia', <http://www.wesleyan.org.au/about-us.html> accessed 17 February 2011.

<sup>8</sup> J. Milton Yinger, 'A Structural Examination of Religion,' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* No. 8, 1969, pp. 88–100; David Moberg, *The Church as a Social Institution: The Sociology of American Religion*, Englewood Cliffs, Prentice Hall, 1962. See also H. Richard Niehbur, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1929; John Scanzoni, 'Innovation and Constancy in the Church-sect Typology,' *American Journal of Sociology*, No. 71, pp. 320–7; Bryan Wilson, 'A Typology of Sects,' in *Sociology and Religion*, ed. Roland Robertson, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1969, pp. 361–83; Thomas Robbins, *Cults, Converts and Charisma: the Sociology of New Religious Movements*, London, Sage, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Gary Bouma, *Religion: Meaning, Transcendence and Community in Australia*, Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1992, p. 93.

<sup>10</sup> Bouma, *Religion*, p. 94.

<sup>11</sup> Bouma, *Religion*, p. 94.

American holiness movement into which he had married in 1929.<sup>12</sup> Alarmed at theological modernism in the Methodist Church, he thought he saw an opportunity to capitalise upon the dissent of more conservative members of that body, though few would break ranks to join the new group and the pioneering years would prove to be extremely difficult. Ridgway was born in Lang Lang, Victoria and after serving as a Methodist local preacher entered Queen's College some time in the 1920s to train for the ministry.<sup>13</sup> During this time he came under the influence of the Canadian Holiness evangelist, Alfred Benson Carson, and left the Methodist Church.<sup>14</sup> The liberal evangelicalism of Queen's, represented by its Master Edward Sugden and its theological lecturer, A. E. Albiston, proved altogether too accommodating to modern theology for the likes of Holiness radicals such as Carson.<sup>15</sup> Marrying Carson's daughter Dorcas, Ridgway moved to Canada where he trained at a Holiness seminary and served a number of congregations in the Standard Church of America between 1930 and 1937.<sup>16</sup> He then became the Superintendent of the Standard Church Mission in Egypt, from where he was evacuated to Australia at the start of the Second World War. Becoming an 'Other Protestant Denominations' chaplain in the RAAF he served at a number of military stations in Victoria and also 'island-hopped' from the island of Morotai to various parts of the Pacific Islands on chaplaincy duties. Somewhere in the Pacific during this time he encountered an American soldier who testified to 'entire sanctification' and said that he was a member of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America.<sup>17</sup> This raised Ridgway's interest and in 1945 he offered himself as a 'field representative' to establish that Church in Australia.

It may be helpful before going any further to place the Wesleyan-Holiness churches in a broader

<sup>12</sup> For a biography of Kingsley Ridgway see Glen O'Brien, *Pioneer with a Passion: The Life of Kingsley Ridgway*, Melbourne, Wesleyan Methodist Church, 1996 (a second revised edition is forthcoming). Also see Glen O'Brien, 'Old Time Methodists in a New World, Kingsley Ridgway and A. B. Carson', *Lucas: An Evangelical History Review, Special Issue—His Dominions: Explorations in Canadian—Australian Religious and Cultural Identity*, No. 29, June 2001, pp. 63–83. Ridgway's influence continues to be felt in the church, with his son, the Rev. Dr. James Ridgway, having provided denominational and institutional leadership over many years, grandson the Rev. Kent Ridgway currently serving as Southern District Superintendent, and great-grandson Dean, serving as pastor of the Hilton Street congregation in the Melbourne suburb of Glenroy.

<sup>13</sup> An account of Ridgway's early experiences is found in his autobiography, Kingsley Ridgway, *In Search of God: An Account of Ministerial Labours in Australia and the Islands of the Sea*. Brockville, Ontario, Standard Publishing House, [c.1937].

<sup>14</sup> For an account of Carson and other Holiness evangelists in Australia in the years prior to the Second World War, see Glen O'Brien, 'A Beautiful Virgin Country Ready for a Revival of Bible Holiness: Early Holiness Evangelists in Australia', *Wesleyan Theological Journal* Vol. 42 No. 2, Fall, 2007, pp. 155–81.

<sup>15</sup> See the essays in Renate Howe, ed. *The Master: The Life and Work of Edward Sugden*, Melbourne, Uniting Academic Press, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> In 1920, the Holiness Movement Church of Canada to which Carson belonged underwent a schism, leading to the formation of the Standard Church of America, under the leadership of Ralph Clifford Horner, who had also originally founded the Holiness Movement Church. In 1983 the Standard Church reported twenty-five churches in North America, twenty-one churches in Egypt and a Bible College and Headquarters in Brockville, Ontario. Rev. Earl Connley, *A Synopsis of the History of the Standard Church of America, Its Present Fields of Activities [sic] and Forward Look* (information sent to the author, dated 27 October 1983). The Standard Church in Canada became part of the Wesleyan Church in 2003.

<sup>17</sup> The exact identity of this serviceman is unknown. A certain Theron Colgrove was one American Wesleyan who had met Kingsley Ridgway in the Pacific at this time. K. M. Ridgway, letter to Wesley Nussey, 17 May, 1945. Colgrove later migrated to Australia where he became part of the fledgling Wesleyan work there for a time. He eventually settled in Queensland, adopting a 'British-Israelite' theology and taking the Hebrew name of Abraham Kol. He died in April 1992. Letter from Allen Hall to Miss H. Colgrove, 25 April, 1992.

historical and ecclesial context.<sup>18</sup> The doctrine of 'entire sanctification', to be experienced as a definite work of grace subsequent to conversion, was a characteristic teaching of John Wesley. When Methodism was planted in America with the formation of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1784, Wesley's *Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, was included in its entirety in the first Discipline of that body. Early American Methodist preachers included in their preaching both the calling of 'sinners' to salvation and of believers to 'entire sanctification'. At the heart of this 'second blessing' was a negative cleansing from sinful motives and attitudes and a positive filling with love for God and neighbour. By the 1860s however the doctrine had fallen into neglect. The Methodist Episcopal Church had moved significantly toward the 'church' end of the church-sect continuum. Methodism had become more fashionable, more middle-class and respectable, and thus much less given to religious ideals such as perfectionism. There were many reform-minded people in the Methodist Episcopal Church, such as Nathan Bangs and Bishop Jesse Peck, who issued a call back to Wesley's original perfectionist emphases. Then, in 1867, the formation of the National Camp-Meeting Association for the Promotion of Christian Holiness in Vineland, New Jersey, gave organizational clout to a strong group of radicals, many of whom were ready to break ranks with mainstream Methodism, and form their own churches and associations.<sup>19</sup> This movement, which emerged from Methodism's more radical wing in the late nineteenth century, and should be seen as the precursor of Pentecostalism, came to be known as 'the Holiness movement'.<sup>20</sup>

The Wesleyan Methodist Church (originally 'Connexion') of America became an active participant in this new Holiness movement, though it had already separated from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1843 over the issue of slavery.<sup>21</sup> Radical abolitionists such as Luther Lee and Orange Scott organized the new church in Utica, New York on a platform of anti-slavery and anti-episcopacy. Though not originally formed around the 'Holiness' message, it saw itself as calling Methodists back to John Wesley's original emphases, and was the first Methodist denomination to formulate an explicit doctrinal statement on 'entire sanctification'.<sup>22</sup> By 1945, when Kingsley Ridgway first made contact with the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America, it had drawn close to the mainstream of American religious life, being an active member of the National Association of Evangelicals and of the World

<sup>18</sup> For the only extended treatment of the Wesleyan-Holiness churches in Australia see Glen O'Brien, 'North American Wesleyan-Holiness Churches in Australia,' PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 2006.

<sup>19</sup> John Leland Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism*. Grand Rapids, Francis Asbury Press, 1985, pp. 133-53.

<sup>20</sup> No recent comprehensive history of the American Holiness Movement has been produced. Helpful works include, Melvin Easterday Deiter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century*, Metuchen, NJ and London, Scarecrow Press, 1980; Charles Edwin Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion: the Holiness Movement and American Methodism, 1876-1936*. Metuchen, NJ, Scarecrow Press, 1974; *Historical Dictionary of the Holiness Movement*, ed. William Kostlevy, Lanham, MD, Scarecrow Press, 2009; Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Tradition: Charismatic Movements in the Twentieth Century*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans, 1997.

<sup>21</sup> The standard denominational history is Ira F. McLeister and Roy S. Nicholson, *Conscience and Commitment: The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America*. Marion, Indiana, Wesley Press, 1976. Excellent chapters on denominational history are included in Wayne E. Caldwell, ed. *Reformers and Revivalists: The History of the Wesleyan Church*. Indianapolis, IN, 1992. Particularly helpful in covering the early formation period is Lee M. Haines, 'Radical Reform and Living Piety: The Story of Earlier Wesleyan Methodism, 1843-1867,' in Caldwell, pp. 31-117.

<sup>22</sup> Leo G. Cox, *John Wesley's Concept of Christian Perfection*. Kansas City, MO, Beacon Hill, 1964, p. 201.

Methodist Council, of which it was a charter member.<sup>23</sup> In 1967 the American Church had grown to 82,358 members and by 2005 it numbered 128,385.<sup>24</sup> Globally it now boasts 'nearly 400,000 constituents in 5,000 churches and missions in 80 countries of the world'.<sup>25</sup> Of course, the number of regular adherents who are not officially members would result in a considerably larger figure.

## Pioneering years from 1945

Kingsley Ridgway's hope that many Australian Methodists would join the Wesleyan Methodist Church went largely unmet. In their foundational years in Australia, the Wesleyan Methodists were often looked upon by mainstream Australian evangelicals as 'holy rollers' and 'sinless perfectionists', purveyors of a brand of religion thought to be populist, coarse, and theologically suspect. Even separatist evangelicals of a more stridently 'fundamentalist' tone, suspected them because they were associated with a highly organized American denomination, with codified rules and a defined polity that was thought to frustrate the freedom of the Spirit's working.<sup>26</sup> Though sometimes referred to as 'that American group' the early vision and energy came from Australian leaders who were the authentic pioneers of the Church. American missionaries came as 'support staff', and mutual respect characterized the relationship between Australian pioneers and their American sponsors. There was an absence of paternalism, and from the beginning, an attempt was made to train and appoint Australian leadership and to provide the new churches with self-sustaining autonomy. The emergence of this new denomination should not be seen as an instance of American religious imperialism, but as an authentic movement of Australian Christians finding in their American cousins willing 'sponsors' who provided legitimacy for their efforts by means of a link with a recognised and established denomination. Americans made numerous blunders, of course, as happens whenever a person from one culture visits another. For example, there was a tendency to view Australia as having had no history or experience of revivals, to see Wesleyan perfectionism as something entirely new, and at times to belittle the contribution of others to Australia's religious heritage. But Australian Wesleyan leaders often shared these skewed assumptions and at times exhibited an exaggerated sense of their own importance in God's plans. Revival was going to come to Australia through them or it wasn't going to come at all. Such attitudes have changed as the reality of the situation has become clearer. The kind of growth and influence early Wesleyan-Holiness pioneers dreamed of, prayed for, and worked toward has happened among Pentecostals rather than among themselves, a fact that has led to much soul searching.

In spite of the less than warm reception it received in its early days, when the Wesleyan Methodist Church held its fiftieth anniversary celebrations in Melbourne in 1996, representatives of almost all

<sup>23</sup> In 1968 the American church would merge with the Pilgrim Holiness Church to become simply 'The Wesleyan Church'. Paul Westphal Thomas and Paul William Thomas. *The Days of our Pilgrimage: the History of the Pilgrim Holiness Church*. Marion, IN, Wesley Press, 1976.

<sup>24</sup> Association of Religion Data Archives, [http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D\\_1466.asp](http://www.thearda.com/Denoms/D_1466.asp), accessed 17 February 2011.

<sup>25</sup> 'Who are the Wesleyans?', <http://www.wesleyan.org/about>, accessed 18 February 2011.

<sup>26</sup> Glen O'Brien, 'Anti-Americanism and Wesleyan-Holiness Churches in Australia,' *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, Vol. 61, No. 2, April 2010, pp. 314-43.



the mainline Protestant and evangelical denominations were present to convey their congratulations. The Wesleyan-Holiness churches in Australia have moved from 'outsider' to 'insider' status because of two broad developments. They demonstrated an ability to reflect those broader aspects of Americanisation that had been integrated into Australian evangelicalism and to minimise those that had not, and they were willing to sacrifice certain distinctive features of their beliefs and practices, which propelled them along the sect-church continuum toward greater acceptance.<sup>27</sup> In many ways, involvement by Wesleyans in the Billy Graham Crusade of 1959 was a watershed moment in its history and in its movement toward broader acceptance. In refusing to boycott Graham, it positioned itself more fully in mainstream evangelicalism over against an older fundamentalism. The Wesleyans had been the only denominational member of the Fellowship of Evangelical Churches of Australia, a fundamentalist conglomerate of small independent churches, which followed the American Carl MacIntyre's lead in boycotting Graham's ministry. In breaking ranks with the FECA, of which it was the only denominational member, the Wesleyan Methodist Church, in a sense 'came of age'.

## Consolidation and growth in the 1980s

In 1974 the Wesleyan Methodist Church still had only four churches in Melbourne and one in Sydney, though it had been operating in the country for over twenty-five years.<sup>28</sup> Following on from the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia on 22 June 1977 there was some growth from switchers, but not to the degree that many Wesleyans anticipated. The Church of the Nazarene, another denomination in the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition, began to advertise itself as 'a church in the Methodist tradition' in order to make its theological orientation clear to the public, and to take advantage of any former Methodists who may have been looking for an alternative to the Uniting Church.<sup>29</sup> This capitalisation upon former Methodists, along with the application of then-popular church growth strategies, aided the opening up of Wesleyan Methodist work in Queensland at a rapid rate in the 1980s, under the indefatigable leadership of the Rev. Don Hardgrave. The strength of the work in Queensland may lie behind James Jupp's erroneous claim that the denomination had

<sup>27</sup> Wesleyan-Holiness churches in Australia with American origins are The Church of the Nazarene, The Church of God (Anderson), The Church of God (Cleveland) and the Wesleyan Methodist Church. The Salvation Army is Wesleyan-Holiness in theology but British in origin. The Christian and Missionary Alliance is sometimes thought of as a Wesleyan-Holiness denomination but according to Russell Warnken, former Principal of the Alliance Theological College in Canberra, the theological outlook of members is quite diverse within an overall evangelical framework, and there is no real sense of belonging to the Wesleyan tradition among members. Russell Warnken, phone conversation with the author, 17 February 2004. See also Appendix B in O'Brien, 'North American Wesleyan-Holiness Churches in Australia,' pp. 240-44.

<sup>28</sup> Don Hardgrave, *For Such a Time: A History of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia*, Brisbane, A Pleasant Surprise, 1988, p. 11.

<sup>29</sup> There are many remarkable parallels between the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia and the Church of the Nazarene, who were both established in the same year through contacts between Australian evangelical leaders and American servicemen. Glen O'Brien, 'A Dogged Inch-by-Inch Affair: The Church of the Nazarene in Australia 1945-1958,' *Journal of Religious History* Vol. 27, No. 2, June 2003, pp. 215-233. Between 1977 and 1982 the Church of the Nazarene grew by a 54% increase in members.

its origins in that state.<sup>30</sup> Hardgrave had resigned from the Methodist Church in October 1974 to join the Wesleyan Methodist Church. In 1977, just prior to the formation of the Uniting Church, he published a booklet that was critical of Church Union stating that 'just putting three sick churches together doesn't make a healthy one.'<sup>31</sup> Between 1975 and 1985 the Wesleyan Methodist Church experienced an annual growth rate of 20–25%, much of this from 'switchers'.<sup>32</sup> Such rapid growth led to some perhaps grandiose expectations on the part of some leaders, most conspicuously Don Hardgrave, who saw the Wesleyans spearheading a 'spiritual awakening' that was expected to 'spread and become a national one with a fresh surge of advance for the whole people of God.'<sup>33</sup>

This growth period for Wesleyans corresponded with a period of considerable tension in the Uniting Church. The 1980s and 90s saw the latter denomination engaged in vigorous discussion over the place of gay and lesbian people in the Church, which alienated many conservative members.<sup>34</sup> Another controversial issue arose when the 1985 Assembly forbade rebaptism of those baptized as infants, a decision which led to the withdrawal from the denomination of a number of larger Uniting Church congregations.<sup>35</sup> In reporting to the Wesleyan World Fellowship, an international body of Wesleyan leaders, in 1984, Australian National Superintendent, the Rev. Tom Blythe, described the pattern of church planting over the previous four years as continuing to be 'opportunistic, with most churches being started around groups of displaced Christians from the Uniting Church scene. While these people often come to us battle scarred and disillusioned and in need of spiritual refreshing, they are usually moulded into soul winning churches.'<sup>36</sup> This 'nucleii [sic] of shifting Methodists' led to a conversion growth of 37.5 per cent over the decade 1974–1983, a period that saw a 253 per cent increase in the number of congregations (twenty-six new churches opened), an 845 per cent increase in AM attendance, and a 756 per cent increase in full membership figures which placed the church in the Fuller School of Church Growth's 'super-incredible' range.<sup>37</sup> The per capita giving increased from \$161 per member in 1974 to \$835 per member in 1983.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>30</sup> James Jupp, 'Wesleyan Methodists', in James Jupp, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Religion in Australia*. Melbourne, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 592–93. Jupp also misspells Kingsley Ridgway's name and mistakenly asserts that he had connections with American military personnel in Queensland. Wesleyan Methodist work was almost exclusively based in Melbourne until the 1980s and Ridgway's connection with a Wesleyan Methodist serviceman took place somewhere in the Pacific islands.

<sup>31</sup> Don Hardgrave, *Church Union: The Other Side of the Coin*, Melbourne, Essential Christian Books, n.d., p. 18. No date is given but the content suggests c. 1977.

<sup>32</sup> 'Introducing an Emerging Church – The Wesleyan Methodists', *Supplement to New Life*, Thursday 31 October, 1985, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> 'Queenslander New Wesleyan Leader', *Supplement to New Life*, Thursday 31 October, 1985, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> See G. Bryant, *Why a Wesleyan Methodist Movement?* cited in Ian Breward, *A History of the Churches in Australasia*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2001, p. 399. In 2000 a Wesleyan Methodist Church in New Zealand separated from the Methodist Church of New Zealand as a result of this same controversy and aligned itself with the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia. <http://www.wesleyan.org.nz/> accessed 28 February 2011. The story of this Church's beginnings is found in Richard Waugh, 'Planting a Church-Planting Denomination,' in *New Vision New Zealand*. Vol. 4, 2011. Auckland, Koru, 2011, pp. 27–300.

<sup>35</sup> Breward, *A History of the Churches in Australasia*, p. 381.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas J. Blythe, 'Report on Australia to the Wesleyan World Fellowship 1984 Marion Indiana', p. 2. Wesleyan Archives, Indianapolis, Indiana.

<sup>37</sup> Blythe, 'Report on Australia to the Wesleyan World Fellowship', p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Blythe, 'Report on Australia to the Wesleyan World Fellowship', p. 3.

In 1988, Tom Blythe estimated that growth in the Wesleyan Methodist Church was made up of 70 per cent transfer from other denominations and only 30 per cent of new converts.<sup>39</sup> A concerted attempt was made to increase the new convert ratio and in June 1991 there were 935 reported conversions in the previous three and a half years. By 1992 the ratio of transfer to new convert growth had shifted to 50/50.<sup>40</sup> During the quadrennium 1988–1992 the church saw a 64 per cent increase in membership from 1,049 to 1,799. Thirteen new congregations and six new preaching points were established. Total giving increased by 81 per cent to \$2.3 million.

The late Rev. Stan Baker led the church through a period of stabilization and maturity in the 1990s, including a re-evaluation of its membership commitments and a period of influence in the wider Pacific region. The 2012 South Pacific Convention to be held in Brisbane, January 15–19, will consider a proposal for a new regional structure that will encompass Australia, New Zealand, the Solomon Islands, and possibly Bougainville.<sup>41</sup> This regional consolidation has developed from the global Wesleyan Church establishing, in 2008, an International Conference to which all General Conferences relate and through which former mission areas are given much greater regional autonomy. Australia and other Pacific churches will together become an Established Regional Conference (The South Pacific Regional Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Church) which is a step up from being a mission field but still not the full autonomy of being a General Conference. The Wesleyan Church in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, established through the missionary effort of Kingsley and Jean Ridgway and Walter and Dorothy Hotchkin in the early 1960s, centred in Mt. Hagen and Fugwa, will not become part of the new Regional Conference.

This new structure will necessitate the writing of a regional constitution which contains essential doctrinal convictions but provides for each national church to continue to have its own legislative authority with a Handbook of polity that is flexible and suited to its own context. This new organisational structure has the potential to aid coordinated effort in missions, theological education and ecumenical relations. A regional President will be appointed for a two-year term for a two year appointment. The International Wesleyan Conference meeting in Panama in late January 2012 will need to approve the creation of the Regional Conference and an inaugural event is likely to be held in Brisbane in May 2012.<sup>42</sup>

The regional growth that has led to such a proposal has not been matched within Australia itself, however, with the earlier growth pattern having slowed and plateaued down to the present. At the

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas J. Blythe, 'Report on Australia to the General Council of Wesleyan World Fellowship', no date but reporting on the years 1984–1988, p. 2. Wesleyan Archives, Indianapolis, Indiana.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas J. Blythe, 'Australian National Conference Report to the General Council of Wesleyan World Fellowship for the years 1988–1992, meeting at Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, Indiana, p. 2. Wesleyan Archives, Indianapolis, Indiana.

<sup>41</sup> Though Bougainville is politically the North Solomons Province of Papua New Guinea, the Wesleyan Methodist Church there is organised separately from the Wesleyan Church in the PNG highlands.

<sup>42</sup> Information on the proposed Established Regional Conference was provided by the Rev. Dr. Richard Waugh, National Superintendent of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of New Zealand, in email correspondence 18 May 2011.

2008 South Pacific Convention and National Conference held at Philip Island, Victoria, a new National Superintendent was appointed for a minimum term of four years. Queensland-born Rev. Lindsay Cameron, along with his wife Dr. Rosalea Cameron, returned from ten years in Africa during the last several of which he had served as Africa Area Director for the Wesleyan Church, a significant denominational appointment. A theologically conservative leader, he has argued for a stronger centralised authority as a means of preserving the distinctiveness of Wesleyan Methodism, a stance that has alienated some more progressive denominational leaders.

The emergence in 2005 of the Indigenous Baparrdu Fellowship in Rockhampton,<sup>43</sup> led by then North Queensland District Superintendent, the Rev. Rex Rigby, himself an Indigenous leader and Aboriginal community leaders Lester Adams and Shea Taylor, is an encouraging sign of Indigenous involvement in the Church.<sup>44</sup> Rigby's responsibility at that time stretched to eight churches situated from Rockhampton to Cairns, all but one congregation non-Indigenous. In 2010 Rigby was elected District Superintendent of South Queensland, the largest and perhaps most influential of the four Districts. Adams, Taylor and their families were present at the South Pacific Convention and 46th National Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Church held on Philip Island, Victoria in January 2008. The didgeridoo was played as a call to worship during an early worship session of the Conference and a 'Gospel Corrobooree' was performed.<sup>45</sup> Well-attended seminars led by Lester Adams and Shea Taylor played an important role in introducing non-Indigenous Wesleyans to the challenges of being an Aboriginal Australian today.

## Movement along the sect–church continuum

Since its growth spurt in the 1980s the Wesleyan Methodist Church has moved a considerable way toward the 'church' end of the sect–church continuum.<sup>46</sup> The Wesleyan Methodist Church began as a sect (in the sociological sense), with very high demands placed upon its members but over time has gradually moderated its expectations lessening its religious 'tension' and becoming more like the older established denominations in the process. At the same time they have been influenced, as indeed have most Protestant and Evangelical Churches, by the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, which has softened an earlier 'anti-tongues' position. Both of these influences have led to the Church developing along more generic and less distinctively 'Holiness' lines.

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<sup>43</sup> 'Baparrdu' means 'God' in the Murri language. Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia website 'News Item,' December 2007 <http://www.wesleyan.org.au/news.htm>, accessed 23 July 2008.

<sup>44</sup> Lester Adams, a police officer, and member of the Rockhampton Wesleyan Methodist Church was NAIDOC [National Aboriginal and Islander Day of Celebrations] person of the year for the Rockhampton area in 2005. He was honoured for his contribution to youth, gospel broadcasting, service in the church, and as a police liaison officer. 'North Queensland District', *The Australian Wesleyan*. Issue 2, 2005, p. 14.

<sup>45</sup> Ruth Thomas and Dallas Thomas, 'South Pacific Convention 2008', *The Australian Wesleyan*, Issue 1, 2008, p. 14.

<sup>46</sup> Some of the material in the following section appeared in Glen O'Brien, 'Joining the Evangelical Club: The Movement of the Wesleyan-Holiness Churches in Australia along the Church-Sect Continuum,' *Journal of Religious History*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Sept. 2008, pp. 320–344.

Holiness Christians in the first half of the twentieth century, like most conservative Christians of the day, were strict teetotallers and opposed tobacco both for health reasons, and because of the belief that it induced laziness and lethargy. Wesleyan-Holiness churches adopted rigid dress codes which were mostly applied to women, and even wedding rings were frequently foresworn in Holiness circles as 'superfluous adornment'.

At the National Conference in January 2004, delegates adopted a membership proposal, by a strong majority, that, in effect, removed the total abstinence rule while still recommending abstinence as the preferred option for members. This was ratified later in the year by three of the Church's four District Conferences. The North American General Conference subsequently applied pressure to the Australian Church to put a 'leadership covenant' in place that would have the effect of expecting total abstinence of ministers and any lay persons appointed to leadership positions beyond their local church setting. This action was seen as a setback by those more progressive members who had worked to eliminate all extra-biblical rules as not in keeping with the kind of Spirit-led process for which they preferred to make room.

Dress codes are no longer a feature of the Wesleyan Methodist Church except among some older, more conservative members who find it difficult to move away from the customs they have imbibed, in many cases, since childhood. Attendance at the movies, once consistently boycotted, is common, especially among younger members, though discernment is urged in regard to the appropriateness of individual films viewed. Dancing is no longer prohibited, with some local churches holding barn dances and discos as either youth or whole-family events. The culture associated with 'nightclubbing', and the 'rave' scene, however, would be frowned upon.

So long as observable external behaviours could successfully be enforced, the degree of religious distinctiveness in Holiness churches could be maintained. Such external markers made it easier to determine who was 'sanctified' and who was not, or at least made it easier to identify which behaviours were in keeping with a profession of entire sanctification. This tension was at its height in the earlier generations of the movement, but the children and grandchildren of the founders, who were raised in the denomination rather than converted into it, did not always embrace the lifestyle commitments as whole-heartedly as their ancestors, and so distinctive features began to be eliminated.

Not only were the outward physical signs of an inward, spiritual holiness made less clear over time, the setting forth of a distinctive doctrine of holiness as a second blessing has also significantly waned in the Wesleyan Methodist Church. Little difference is now found between Wesleyan preaching on sanctification and general exhortations to godly living that might be found in any evangelical church, though there has been a concerted effort on the part of the current National Superintendent, the Rev. Lindsay Cameron, to reverse this trend. Moderation of a movement's message always comes at a cost—the loss of a distinctive fervour, the loss of a sense of divine mission to announce a specific message about holiness, and, as evidenced by the recent decision of the Wesleyan Methodist Church no longer to mandate (but still to recommend) total abstinence, the lessening of religious demands upon its members. A Wesleyan Methodist congregation today is as likely to be found singing a

'Hillsong' chorus originating from Australia's largest Assemblies of God congregation as a Charles Wesley hymn. A sermon is more likely to end with an invitation to come forward to be 'filled with the Spirit' or 'touched by God' than to be 'entirely sanctified'. 'Second blessing' holiness as an identifiable transformative experience has to a large extent been replaced by a generalised call to holy living or to the more pedestrian 'purpose-driven life'. All of this could be seen as part of the price paid for a broader acceptance among fellow evangelicals as well as the result of the reception into the Church's membership of a large number of 'switchers' from other denominations.<sup>47</sup>

While a definite movement toward the 'church' end of the sect-church continuum is recognisable, it is still clear that Wesleyan-Holiness churches in Australia retain at least some sect-like features. Typologies of religious expression see sects as tending to be more conservative theologically, strict on questions of personal morality, and exhibiting the highest rate of church attendance, and habits of individual piety, such as daily prayer and Bible reading.<sup>48</sup> The Wesleyan Methodist Church clearly fits this description. Religious communities will exhibit various 'styles' or 'modes of transcendence', with one style tending to predominate. In Gary Bouma's typology these modes include: (i) awe, wonder, and mystery; (ii) ecstasy; and (iii) mind and reason.<sup>49</sup> Earlier types of Holiness movement expressions were decidedly more 'ecstatic' than they are at present, another indicator of movement to the 'church' end of the sect-church continuum. Wesleyans are more likely to experience transcendence through the hearing of the sacred text of scripture, more engaged in Bible study, and the application of such findings to life situations, than to be searching for moments of religious ecstasy. Experience is to be regulated by the Bible and not the Bible interpreted through experience. When the Scriptures are expounded through the instrumentality of an 'anointed' preacher, the voice of God is understood to be heard and the will moved to action. Like most other Evangelicals they no longer think of the Bible (if they ever did) as something 'dictated' by God word-for-word and thus above all scholarly enquiry. But they have remained committed to the authority of the Bible's message and to an essentially traditional reading of it that results in an orthodox theological position, and an adoption of traditional Christian moral standards.

Whether the movement of the Wesleyan Methodists Church of Australia along the sect-church continuum is a result of upward social mobility is difficult to ascertain, but my anecdotal impression is that it has not been a factor. There has been no extensive collection of data on the sociological makeup of early Australian Wesleyans. An examination of seventeen marriage certificates between the years 1953 and 1963 showed that about half of those being married were drawn from white collar professions, such as office workers, and nurses, most of the rest being tradesmen and unskilled labourers. Interestingly, only one of the women listed 'housewife' as her occupation. Five of the

<sup>47</sup> A phrase drawn from the popular book by Rick Warren, widely used in Evangelical, Holiness, and Pentecostal churches, Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What On Earth Am I Here For?*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002.

<sup>48</sup> 'Right-Wing Protestant' is the term used to describe such groups in Gary D. Bouma and Beverly R. Dixon, *The Religious Factor in Australian Life*, Melbourne, MARC Australia, 1987, pp. vi; pp. 4-8. The same group is termed 'Conservative Evangelical Protestant' in Gary Bouma, *Religion: Meaning, Transcendence and Community in Australia*, Melbourne, Longman Cheshire, 1992.

<sup>49</sup> Bouma, *Religion*, pp. 68-73.

seventeen women were engaged in some kind of office work, six women were in the nursing field and there was one woman doctor.<sup>50</sup>

The findings of the National Church Life Survey of 1996 give us an idea of the demography of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia, the only Wesleyan-Holiness denomination to participate in this survey of Protestant churches.<sup>51</sup> The 1996 findings show that in ratio of male to female, in educational levels, in marital status, and in ethnicity, those who worshipped in Wesleyan churches were not significantly different from those in any other of the participating churches.<sup>52</sup> 11 per cent of Wesleyans had a bachelor's degree, as compared with 12 per cent of all other Protestants. Those holding post-graduate degrees were 6 per cent as compared to 7 per cent of others. They rated higher than most in their giving (53 per cent give one tenth of all their income to the church). They had a higher commitment to biblical authority than most, and were less likely ever to have 'spoken in tongues' than any of the other participating groups. The average size of their congregations was 51 (average of all others 69) and those participating in small groups at some time other than the Sunday worship service was a high 56 per cent (all others 42 per cent). Like the other Protestant churches the age profile of the Wesleyans closely matched the general population. For example, 32 per cent of Wesleyans were aged between 20 and 39, which compared with 29 per cent of the general population. The Wesleyan churches showed a high rate of 'switchers' who already have explicit Christian faith and have 'switched' to the Wesleyans from another denomination.

The Wesleyan Methodist Church has never prohibited the ordination of women to the ministry, and officially endorses the full participation of women at every level of ministry, yet church leaders have tended not to force the issue when congregations, influenced by more Reformed evangelical views, have not wished to have a woman appointed to their church. Views on biblical inspiration which might be described as 'fundamentalist' gradually replaced an earlier 'dynamic' view. The radical social stances of their nineteenth-century Holiness forebears, such as abolitionism, women's rights, and pacifism tended to be forgotten and a much more politically and socially conservative constituency has emerged.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>50</sup> The marriages were all performed in the state of Victoria. The male occupations were textile worker, minister (x2), carpenter, labourer, machine mechanic, student, truck driver, missionary, salesman, electrical fitter, butcher, clerk, public servant, driver, engineer, and moulder. The female occupations were nursing sister (x2), nurse (x2), student nurse, nurses aid, sales assistant, process worker, machinist, clerk, typist, telephonist, teletypist, calculator operator, housewife, teacher, and doctor. Wesleyan-Holiness Archive, Kingsley College, Melbourne.

<sup>51</sup> This survey was a joint project of the Uniting Church Board of Mission and Anglicare, Diocese of Sydney. Detailed findings of the NCLS are given in Peter Kaldor, et al. *Build My Church: Trends and Possibilities for Australian Churches*. Adelaide, Open Book, 1999. Unfortunately the non-participation of Wesleyans in subsequent National Church Life Surveys leaves us without a more recent demographic snapshot.

<sup>52</sup> All of the information in this section is drawn from National Church Life Survey, 'Taking Stock: Printout of a Detailed Denominational Profile (Wesleyan Methodist)' accompanying material to Peter Kaldor, et al. *Taking Stock*, Adelaide, Open Book, 1999.

<sup>53</sup> For an excellent treatment of the socially radical nature of the early American holiness movement see Donald Dayton, *Discovering an Evangelical Heritage*, Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson, 1988.

In the field of sociology of religion the term 'tension' refers to high levels of radical religious commitment. William Sims Bainbridge sees 'pumping up the tension' of religious sects as an attempt to ensure their survival and growth.<sup>54</sup> However, in a group dependent on 'switchers' it may well be the lowering of tension that allows a movement toward the mainstream leading to growth. Because the growth and survival of the Wesleyan Methodist Church has depended more on 'transfer' than on 'convert' growth it seems that a lowering, rather than a heightening, of religious tension has been the major factor in its survival. The lowering of lifestyle standards and the lessening of theological uniqueness has made growth by transfer more possible. However continued reliance on the authority of the Bible and a general sense of being identifiably 'Wesleyan' rather than 'Calvinist', 'Pentecostal', or 'Liberal', have helped preserve some degree of uniqueness of identity and anchored the Church in theological conservatism.

In 1985 the Wesleyan Methodist Church declared, 'We are not sectarian in emphasis, being part of the Methodist World Council [sic]. The Wesleyan Methodist Church has continued since its founding in 1843 and is part of historic Methodism, which originated in the great revival of the eighteenth century under John and Charles Wesley.'<sup>55</sup> However, this disavowal of sectarianism needs to be set alongside an equally vehement rejection of the type of ecumenism represented by the World Council of Churches. In an advertising supplement to *New Life* newspaper in 1985, the Wesleyans declared themselves fearful of any church union that would lead to 'subsequent loss of spiritual fervour' and declared the 'World Council of Churches and its related national organisations as being established contrary to biblical principles...we refuse to be associated with them on these grounds...We are [however] committed to co-operation with other Evangelicals where this will strengthen the Christian witness.'<sup>56</sup> In 2010 a request to the National Board of Administration to consider applying for membership in the National Council of Churches was rejected. So, in its official church pronouncements, and in its local networks, the Wesleyan Methodist Church's posture seems warm toward individual members and churches of other denominations, but decidedly cold toward mainstream ecumenism.

There is much room for improvement in relations between the Uniting Church and the Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia. Wesleyans tend to view the Uniting Church as theologically liberal and are especially wary of the Uniting Church's greater openness to same-sex relationships. If Uniting Church members are aware of the existence of the Wesleyan Methodist Church they tend to think of it as 'that American group', a quite inaccurate perception given that its leadership and constituency has been Australian since its inception. Or they may think of it as a group of reactionary fundamentalists, which is also inaccurate since, though certainly on the conservative end of the spectrum, Wesleyan Methodists generally value Wesley's 'catholic spirit' and typically engage quite happily with their fellow Christians. Both denominations are member churches of the World Methodist Council and this alone is a reason for seeking greater engagement and cooperation. More vigorous World Methodist

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<sup>54</sup> William Sims Bainbridge, *The Sociology of Religious Movements*, New York and London, Routledge, 1997, p. 79.

<sup>55</sup> 'More About the Wesleyans', *Supplement to New Life*, 31 October, 1985, p. 1.

<sup>56</sup> 'More About the Wesleyans', p. 1.



Council activity in Australia has the potential to contribute to this end. Membership of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in the National Council of Churches and in State ecumenical councils would help to foster greater understanding and awareness. Friendly approaches to Wesleyan Methodists from such ecumenical bodies may help in this process.

## Conclusion

The Wesleyan Methodist Church of Australia has survived and extended itself beyond small beginnings in a context of rapidly changing religious outlook. An important strategy of survival has been active co-operation with other evangelical Christians, and, to a lesser extent (and in more recent times), with Pentecostals, the tradition with which they probably have the most in common theologically, notwithstanding efforts to distance themselves from the 'tongues movement'. (Quarrels within families are often more violent than those among strangers.) An attitude of sectarian exclusion from others would not have provided the support mechanisms needed to prosper. Friendly relations with fellow Evangelicals, though necessary for survival, were hard-won, especially while the label of 'sinless perfectionism' clung to the early pioneers. Reformed evangelicals were suspicious of the Wesleyan stress on 'Spirit-filled' individualism and Pentecostals believed Wesleyans had the opposite problem in 'quenching the Spirit' by rejecting the 'gift of tongues'. But the Wesleyan Methodist Church experienced growth largely through 'switchers' from these two groups, leading to an inevitable dilution of Holiness distinctiveness.

It is doubtful that the Wesleyan Methodist Church has had a significant shaping influence on Australian evangelicalism, except perhaps in South East Queensland where its numbers are strong. Perhaps its greatest influence has been through Kingsley College, until 2008 a Member Institute of the Sydney College of Divinity (though it is situated in Melbourne), where a large number of evangelical students from non-Wesleyan denominations have studied.<sup>57</sup> The student body at Kingsley College (formerly Wesleyan Methodist Bible College) was always overwhelmingly non-Wesleyan, and it is likely that neither Kingsley College nor the Nazarene Theological College could have kept their doors open if not for students from other denominations.

The Wesleyan Methodist Church emerged as an important new expression of the 'Holiness' impetus that had been present in Australian evangelicalism in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, primarily through Methodist influence, but which had all but died out. The doctrine of 'entire sanctification' as a second work of grace was not introduced into Australia by the Wesleyan-Holiness Churches, although it was revived by them. A few evangelicals influenced by earlier forms of holiness teaching were drawn to the Wesleyans and the Nazarenes in the immediate post-Second World War period because they recognised an echo of this older, but now almost forgotten tradition, but the numbers were negligible and did not provide a solid foundation for growth and consolidation.

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<sup>57</sup> Kingsley College was founded as the Wesleyan Methodist Bible College in 1949 and was renamed after the founder, Kingsley Ridgway, in 1979.

While the Wesleyan–Holiness churches have not spearheaded a widespread spiritual awakening as they had hoped they would, they nonetheless represent the continuation of the Wesleyan theological tradition within Australian and New Zealand evangelicalism. While remaining welcoming toward ‘switchers’, they have also sought to engage secular people with the claims of the Christian faith. As the membership demographic of the Wesleyan Methodist Church has become more and more like other Churches, there has been much less uniqueness exhibited among constituents. It has become more mainstream, borrowing freely from trends in the broader Pentecostal–Evangelical culture. There is today very little social threat to the ongoing existence of the Church, either from the general community or from other Christian churches. This means that there is no longer any need to huddle together and stress distinctive doctrinal beliefs or behavioural norms. Numerical growth in membership, coupled with the development of strong denominational structures, has given the Church all of the features of an established denomination. Yet the strong commitment to biblical authority and a stress upon evangelism have kept the Church anchored at a level of religious tension higher than most other Protestant groups, but probably less than Pentecostals. Individual Wesleyan Methodists still like to think of their Church as a ‘movement’, but in terms of the sociology of religion, it is something else. Movements are hungry to survive and prosper; Churches have arrived and settled down. The future of the denomination may well depend on what its leaders and constituents believe its mission to be. Indications are that the Church is aware of this and is taking seriously the question of what it might mean to apply John Wesley’s mission of ‘spreading scriptural holiness’ in twenty-first-century Australia.