

REPORT ON MATS 2011: THE INAUGURAL CONFERENCE OF THE MELANESIAN ASSOCIATION OF THEOLOGICAL SCHOOLS

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The idea of organising and hosting a non-denominational theological conference at Pacific Adventist University (PAU) was first raised in 2009. The university was in the process of developing postgraduate degree programs and promotion of research and publishing was high on the agenda. Perhaps all of the enthusiasm led to some overreaching – early plans for the conference were Pacific-wide and too ambitious. The cost of travel is prohibitive and attracting national faculty and postgraduates from the Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Polynesia would be very difficult. After PAU added conference funding to its budget in the first half of 2010, finding an appropriate conceptual framework for the conference became a matter of priority.

A concept was needed that would attract participants from around PNG, and, hopefully, further afield. Slowly, a plan to revive and reconstitute the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools (MATS) began to take shape. If an annual conference were to come under the MATS “banner”, then it would be “owned” by everyone. Further, if an annual meeting of the Association were to be held in conjunction with an annual conference, then theological faculty and postgraduate students from all over Papua New Guinea might be persuaded to attend both. MATS had been inoperative for more than ten years, so this was an important initiative for the whole region.

There was a slow response to the first and second round of emails and letters. This was only to be expected – resources are limited, lecturers are overloaded, and time is at a premium. The two catalysts that got things moving were the use of the phone to issue invitations, and the involvement of Dr John Hitchen (Laidlaw College in NZ). John and his wife were in PNG for 15 years from 1965-1979, and he has been coming back for short periods of service since 1989. The credit for founding MATS should probably go to Charles Forman (Yale University in the USA), the well-known Pacific-mission scholar. But it was John, who wrote the original constitution, and it was only right that he should be involved in the revival and reconstitution of the association. Vital support also came from Dr David Thiele (PAU), Dr Graeme Batley (Christian Leaders' Training College), and Dr David Willis (Catholic Theological Institute).

MATS 2011, which was held at PAU between June 21-24, proved to be a resounding success. Scholars came from all over Papua New Guinea, as well as from Australia (Avondale College), New Zealand (University of Auckland), and Thailand (Asia-Pacific International University). A total of 17 papers were presented in four sessions over two days. Missiological papers dominated, but there were also a good number of regional, theological, and biblical studies papers. Presenters came from CLTC, CTI, Divine Word University, Lutheran Highlands Seminary, Martin Luther Seminary, PAU, Sonoma College, Laidlaw College, and the Melanesian Institute. Representatives of Newton College, and the Salvation Army Officer Training College, were also in attendance.

Some of the highlights of the conference were: (a) a collegial and academic spirit throughout (participants soon relaxed and began to enjoy themselves); (b) an engrossing panel discussion on postgraduate theological education in PNG (one of the most gratifying aspects of the conference was that three papers were presented by postgraduates); (c) the presentations of the plenary speaker, Dr Tim Meadowcroft of Laidlaw College (who outlined a theology of the word of God from scripture, in a series of stimulating talks entitled "God speaks"); and (d) very good attendance at the meeting to revive and reconstitute the Association, which was held on the last day of the conference.

All who attended MATS 2011 have seen how an annual conference might inspire theology-related research in Papua New Guinea. It presents an inducement to produce at least one academic paper per year, thus facilitating the continued development of theological faculty (while furnishing articles for the *Melanesian Journal of Theology*). Apart from providing a much-needed forum for postgraduate students to develop their academic skills, an annual conference and active association can also address the severe shortage of Melanesian biblical scholars (and theologians). Melanesia is already well provided for in terms of applied theology. But there is an urgent need for academically-trained biblical scholars. While no disparagement of other areas is intended, until Melanesia begins to produce its own biblical scholars, there will be an inherent weakness in the various theological faculties in the region.

Theology lecturers should be looking out for students with genuine academic potential, who can be assisted into postgraduate research programs, both here and abroad. Such students might be inspired with a vision of what good biblical scholarship can do for the people of God in Melanesia. Finally, an active association can also approach government agencies on behalf of member institutions. Until theology and biblical studies positions can be filled by Melanesians, expatriate faculty will continue to be needed. At times, such as the present, we may need to gently remind the government of that fact.

For all of these reasons, we look forward with anticipation to MATS 2012, and the next meeting of the Association. There is cause to be optimistic about the continued development of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools.