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Methodists and the Social Conscience
in South Australia
and New South Wales, 1949-1972.

by

C. Paul Barreira

A thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts at the Australian
National University.

November, 1985.



Except where otherwise acknowledged in the text,
this thesis represents my original research.

C.P. Barreira
Department of History
Faculty of Arts
Australian National University
Canberra, Australia.



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Abbreviations

ACC	Australian Council of Churches
ALRASA	Abortion Law Reform Association of South Australia.
AMA	Australian Medical Association.
CLM	Church and Life Movement.
DCC	Department of Christian Citizenship.
LCL	Liberal and Country League.
SAA	South Australian Archives.
SAM	South Australian Methodist.
SQD	Social Questions Department.
SSD	Social Service Department.

INTRODUCTION

Along with Protestant Churchmen¹ of other denominations throughout the Western world in the 1960s, many Australian Methodists felt obliged to re-assess the nature and place of the Christian Church in an increasingly affluent, liberal and secular society. From the mid-1940s to the 1960s consistently fewer Methodists could respond affirmatively to the question put shortly after World War Two by the Director of the South Australian Methodist Church's Department of Social Service, the Reverend E.H. Woollacott: 'Are we dedicated to the task of making society conform to the will of God'?² Woollacott perceived the 'will of God' in terms of the Nonconformist conscience which in Woollacott's day was the cornerstone of the Methodists' thinking and activity on social questions. From at least the 1880s the political and social questions which interested Australian Nonconformity 'were generally those which had plain moral implications'.³

After 1945 restrictive social legislation such as six o'clock closing was under threat as many more prosperous Australians rejected the ascetic legacy of late nineteenth century Protestantism. Numerous Methodists, too, rejected the Nonconformist conscience and eventually even the institutional Methodist Church rejected Woollacott's call. In 1966, when the Church had lost sight of Woollacott's question and the terms in which it was framed, the Reverend John Barrett confessed on behalf of the Annual Conference of the South Australian Church that 'we are often the Church that does not know what to say'.⁴

Previous research on Protestant Churchmen and society has concentrated on the formation, nature and intolerance of the Nonconformist conscience and whether or not it was appropriate to Australian conditions. Walter Phillips concluded that Protestants emerged from the 1880s confident that a 'Christian Australia' was a feasible goal, a goal belatedly abandoned only in the mid-1960s.⁵ David Bollen, at one time a candidate for the Methodist ministry, was anxious

1 Churchmen includes both clergy and committed laity.

2 SAM (South Australian Methodist), 30 July 1950.

3 Ibid., 19 January 1952.

4 Daily Record (SA), 13 October 1966.

5 Walter Phillips, Defending 'A Christian Country': Churchmen and Society in New South Wales in the 1880s and After (St. Lucia, Queensland, 1981), pp.xiii-xiv.

to tease out a social conscience among Protestants between 1890 and 1910 in New South Wales which stood apart from late Victorianism and expressed concern for social conditions.⁶ Recently, after analysing pastoral care, evangelism, ecumenical movements, controversies over Christian ritual, sectarian conflict and moral reformism, Richard Broome challenged Bollen's argument that the 'dominant' interest of Protestantism was 'social, not moral reconstruction' and was highly critical of the Protestants' reform crusade which, he said, 'deteriorated into the excesses of cant and coercion which became known as wowserism'.⁷

Little research has been completed on the experience of the Protestants' social conscience after World War One. A partial record is Ken Dempsey's Conflict and Decline which examined the relations between the clergy and laity in the local circuit. Dempsey concluded that after World War Two 'disagreement and, on occasion, open conflict between laymen and clergy was a fairly common occurrence in the Methodist Church and in a number of other Protestant Churches as well'.⁸ A major factor in the distancing of clergy from laity was the 'revolution in theological thinking throughout the western world concerning the role of the ministry and the laity, and the relationship of both to the community'.⁹

Prior to World War Two, and for some years after, Churchmen sought to dominate the community according to the dictates of the Nonconformist conscience. When domination could no longer be sustained the Nonconformist conscience faded, but the reaction of the institutional Church to the changes of the 1950s and 1960s in this context has not previously been analysed or documented in detail.¹⁰ This thesis will

6 J.D. Bollen, Protestantism and Social Reform in New South Wales 1890-1910 (Melbourne, 1972).

7 Richard Broome, Treasure in Earthen Vessels (St. Lucia, Queensland, 1980), pp.xi, xiii and 164.

8 Kenneth Dempsey, Conflict and Decline: Ministers and Laymen in an Australian Country Town (Sydney, 1983), p.172.

9 Ibid., p.173.

10 Methodist clergy participated in the study by Norman Blaikie of Victorian clergy in 1969. See his Plight of the Australian Clergy: To Convert, Care or Challenge (St. Lucia, Queensland, 1979). A quick overview of South Australian Methodism is in Dean Drayton, Five Generations - Evangelism in South Australia: a Study of the Methodist Church. 1836-1976 (Adelaide, 1980).

examine the experience of the Methodist Church in South Australia and New South Wales, and will argue that the decline of the Nonconformist conscience was a two-fold event. First, there was the overall decline in the Methodist constituency to which various external factors contributed: immigration, declining fertility, apostasy and the failure to attract the young in the early 1960s. Secondly, a number of Churchmen were alive to public disenchantment with restrictive social legislation and thus further weakened the commitment of the Church to the Nonconformist conscience.

Methodism remained committed to success in the face of decline. From the viewpoints of evangelism and the social conscience Bollen neatly described the Methodists' predicament:

[They] are now well into the great crisis of their history: the encounter of Churches committed to growth within a society that is subjecting them to decline.¹¹

On the one hand, fewer Australians appeared to believe in a transcendental being as a basis on which to build and experience answers to questions of existence and meaning. On the other, Methodism committed itself to making purposeful contributions to all aspects of social and political life largely consistent with contemporary secular liberalism. Thus the Church redefined the meaning of success, from dominating society through restrictive social legislation to inquiring into and pronouncing upon public policy. The weakness of this impulsive social conscience was shown when the Church drew back from resolutely attempting to influence government administration despite occasionally thorough research and sound recommendations. As they improvised a Methodist social conscience in the 1960s the inner circles of the Church acquiesced in modernity and were not alert to the declension of the Church's religious identity which - in part - had attracted the laity week by week for generations. Ironically, as the case study on abortion shows, to the extent that the Church consented to contemporary life and morals, modernity was indifferent to the Church because, in this context, the Church was largely redundant.

¹¹ J.D. Bollen, Religion in Australia (Sydney, 1973), p.63.

The principal sources used to demonstrate this argument have been manuscript materials; only a few of the insights of the Reverend Dr. Arnold Hunt into the post-war experience of the South Australian Methodists have been available;¹² his general history of South Australian Methodism has not been sighted but is due for publication before the end of 1985. The most important sources have been the minutes of the permanent social questions committees of the South Australian and New South Wales Conferences and the Daily Records of Conference. Little correspondence is available and most of it dates from the late 1960s and early 1970s. The journals and minutes of District Synods¹³ are important when attempting to gauge the moods and responses of local Methodists on contemporary issues. New South Wales sources have been more spare than those from South Australia. For example, no journals of District Synods were kept in that State, nor was the Daily Record of Conference quite as detailed as similar documents in South Australia. Social questions committees were not as thoroughly minuted either.

The records of para-Church or inter-Church^{agencies} have generally not been consulted, either because they could not be located or they were deemed to be not particularly relevant. For example, no records after 1946 of the United Churches Social Reform Board representing the Free Churches in South Australia appear to have survived. The minutes of the Temperance Alliance in South Australia are stored in the State Archives but remain unsorted. Few amendments to the record were expected to flow from a time-consuming search of them. In Sydney the same records have simply disappeared. They are said to have been taken from the Alliance offices to the Mitchell Library but there is no record that they actually arrived. This is unfortunate because relations between the Methodists and the Alliance were complicated by differing perspectives on the nature of temperance in the 1950s and 1960s.

No private papers of the Reverend E.H. Woollacott, nor of his successor at the South Australian Social Service Department, the Reverend

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- 12 Interview: Reverend Dr. Arnold Hunt, 18 June 1984. Dr. Hunt was Principal of the Methodists' theological college in South Australia and editor of the SAM during the 1960s.
- 13 Each State Conference was divided into a number of districts. They followed the geographical character of the State.

M.C. Trenorden, appear to have survived. To some extent these deficiencies have been overcome by personal interviews with respective colleagues and friends.

The connexional journals, the South Australian Methodist and the Sydney Methodist, have been significant sources of basic data and impressions by contemporaries. Both were official organs but did not often document official transactions, although Synod and Conference reports were provided by them. The respective editors, by the nature of their faith, understanding and representation of the Church in the world, have influenced the nature of contemporary Methodism which is represented in the pages of their papers.

Clearly, then, the thesis is based on the relics of articulate Methodists who, with few exceptions, were the opinion-makers of the institutional Church. In chapter One committed Methodists are distinguished from nominal adherents of Methodism. Committed Methodists may then be divided between those who refused to cut their social consciences in the fashion requested by their Church, and those who felt comfortable with modernity. The problem of the quality of the individual Methodist's articulation is not confined to (absent) reactions by Church members to official resolutions on social questions. It extends especially to the spiritual condition of the Church, for example, which has been an unknown quality in post-war years and the subject of impressions only.¹⁴ The problem of muted Methodists might have been better overcome, if not totally surmounted, if the thesis were based on sources for one State only.

The choice of South Australia and New South Wales as the locations for this study was guided by the demographic consideration that the Methodist penetration of religious and social life in the two States differed greatly. Whereas in New South Wales nominal Methodists accounted for around ten per cent of the population, in South Australia

14 See Dempsey, Conflict and Decline, p.173 where he says that 'unfortunately we lack any systematic study of the opinions Australian laypeople hold about the part played in local church life by their ministers'. This observation can be extended to cover many aspects of Methodist Church life.

in 1947 they constituted just over one-quarter of that State's population. It was the highest penetration by nominal Methodism of any State. New South Wales represented the lowest. Consequently, until the mid-sixties, Methodism had differing experiences as a part of the political community in respective States and different levels of access to legislative and executive arms of government.

In the latter parts of the thesis South Australia dominates for reasons which bear heavily on the conclusions of the thesis as a whole: government offered Methodism the opportunity to participate in decision-making. No similar opportunity was made available in New South Wales. The South Australian experience demonstrated that unless the Methodist Church was able to dominate the public agenda on social questions with 'plain moral implications',¹⁵ - as it had done in South Australia in 1940s and 1950s - its contribution would prove to be irrelevant and could be ignored even by members of parliament who were committed Methodists.

The political irrelevance of the Church on social questions among its own members¹⁶ and in public bodies is one reason for the small part given in this study to domestic reactions to the war in Vietnam. Methodists were deeply divided over the Australian commitment to the war, national service and the methods of protest. With rare exceptions, debate was couched in secular terms.¹⁷ While the war continued it remained a debilitating influence on numerous personal relationships. Once the war began to diminish and Australian and American withdrawal from Vietnam was imminent, debate disappeared from official Methodist circles. Simultaneously, Methodist fellowship improved greatly. As far as the Methodist social conscience was concerned, the war was a passing phenomenon.

Although the thesis ranges widely it is not a general history of the Methodist Church in either State. Much more detail on many more elements of Methodist life would need to be digested for that to be so. Reference to other developments which either reflected the changes

15 SAM. 19 January 1952.

16 Hans Mol, The Faith of Australians (Sydney, 1985) p.156.

17 See, for example, Methodist (Sydney), 19 November 1966. SAM, 21 October 1966.

occurring in Methodist thinking and activity on social and moral questions or illustrated the considerable variety of purpose that was encompassed by the Methodist Church is made as seems necessary. An exception has been Church union. To have considered union in this context would have extended the scope of the thesis impracticably, especially regarding the local church, although the discussions of the Basis of Union at Quarterly Meetings in 1964-54 could prove a most informative source for the Methodists' faith in the 1960s.¹⁸ More particularly, union can be dismissed from this thesis on the same grounds as Vietnam: it was not pertinent to the redevelopment of the Methodists' social conscience in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Further, this is not a history of Church-state relations although much time is spent enquiring into parliamentary responses to Methodist initiatives or attitudes. These matters are reported only insofar as they were relevant to the Methodists' own decision-making and activity or inactivity, as the case may be. In this context it is important to note also that no attention is paid to the Central Methodist Missions or other local missions. This thesis is concerned with the views of the Church on social questions, not the philanthropic works of the Church, an area in which the Church was often genuinely innovative and effective.

The thesis contains seven chapters. Chapter One attempts to identify Methodists and the condition of the Church in the late 1940s. It also introduces two clergymen who were given the responsibility by the irrelative Annual Conferences to defend the Nonconformist conscience and the legislative legacy of the early twentieth century. Chapter Two analyses the close association between Methodists and other Australians in the first post-war decade. On one hand, the threat which prosperity would later pose to religious sensibilities is here seen to have been overlooked by Methodists in their enthusiasm for economic security. On the other, the differences between Methodists on contemporary social questions can also be seen in embryonic form in the context of the Cold War. The third chapter continues the theme of prosperity contrasting the enthusiasm generated by the Billy Graham crusades in 1959 among many

18 See Alan W. Black, 'The sociology of ecumenism: initial observations on the formation of the Uniting Church in Australia' in Alan W. Black and Peter Glasner (eds.), Practice and Belief: Studies in the Sociology of Australian Religion (Sydney, 1983), pp.86-107.

ordinary Methodists with the presentiments of several clergymen of great uncertainties for the Church.

Chapters Four and Five observe the fading Nonconformist conscience in Methodism by an examination of the reactions of the Methodist Church to liberalised liquor licensing.

Chapters Six and Seven analyse the way in which Methodism improvised a social conscience in the 1960s and the early 1970s. Chapter Six considers the impact and coincidence of radical individualism, religious decline, conflict within the Church and Methodist decline according to several social criteria. The nature of the compromises made by at least some of the inner circles of Methodism with modernity is illustrated in Chapter Seven, a case study of the South Australian Church and the public issue of abortion.

In this order, then, this thesis observes the demise of the Nonconformist conscience among Methodists in the 1950s and 1960s and assesses the Church's (often passive) reactions to impatient secular demands for tolerance.