

**R**emember the Methodist Church? Although that question will provoke outrage in some quarters, by now it might be true to say that Australian Christians don't think of institutional Methodism any more, that tradition having been subsumed in the Uniting Church. Not so in the outside world, where the estimated 54 million Methodists are scattered across 64 countries on five continents. Last month our Church Affairs editor, PETER BENTLEY, attended the 16th World Methodist Conference in Singapore. He reports on his experience.



*Singaporean Methodist bishop Ho Chee-Sin celebrates communion at the opening service of the World Methodist Conference.*

## Sampling the Methodists in Singapore

**M**ethodism, like all religious traditions, suffers from stereotypes. One stereotype of Methodism is that it is anti-clerical. Some even believe that Methodists do not even have ministers.

The preponderance and variety of clerical figures among the delegates at the World Methodist Conference would have quickly convinced anyone who held such a stereotype that it was entirely fallacious.

Moreover, such an individual might have been astounded by the sight of a sea of episcopal purple present. Bishops have been long established in some sectors of world Methodism, especially in the US, where there are several powerful Methodist churches.

But not only in America do bishops abound. One episcopal delegate was the Nigerian Methodist Patriarch, who actually bears the official title of (don't listen to this, John Wesley) His Eminence, S.C Mbang.

Other parts of the Methodist world, including British Methodists, have held out against episcopacy. If anyone wants to see the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) as still part of world Methodism, it might be noted in passing that it lined up with the non-(anti?)episcopal sector when its recent National Assembly assented to the wishes of the majority of its membership and voted against the introduction of bishops.

The majority of the participants at the World Methodist Conference were North Americans, primarily, it seemed to me, because they can afford to attend and have a package holiday at the same time. Not surprising; individual North

American Methodist churches have larger budgets than many of the national member churches participating in the Council.

(It was quite plain that Western tourists, even those on average incomes, are comparatively wealthy in Singapore. They can afford to eat in the fashionable restaurants and to stay in the tourist hotels and to attend a large church conference at one of the more expensive hotel/convention complexes. They can even afford the three Singapore dollars for the morning cup of coffee at the conference, whereas for the same cost they could have a full meal at a local eatery.)

But while the North American dominance of the Council is still obvious (they have over 45 percent of the Executive Council membership), there is a growing representation from Africa, Asia and South America.

Methodism, of course, was a powerful component part of the Uniting Church in Australia, and reflecting the continuance of the Methodist tradition in

that Church about 40 laity and clergy from Australia attended the conference, 12 of them as official UCA delegates.

The Uniting Church (along with other United/Methodist-related bodies) is one of 64 churches in the World Methodist Council. The Council has a representative membership of 500 and meets only once during its five year appointment.

Altogether over 3,200 people attended the conference and Council meetings and the many special pre-meetings and consultations. Many of these people came from countries where the cost of attending involved a significant financial sacrifice. That applied to some Australians too!

The conference provides an opportunity for "the people called Methodist" and other historically related representatives to attend a large gathering for education, inspiration and fellowship. It is a coming together that John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement, might have envisaged when he used the phrase "The world is my parish."

At the conference there were regular large scale meetings, including the opening service at which over 3,500 people joined in the celebration of the eucharist and a personal highlight, the 10-course banquet dinner and cultural night for nearly 4,000 people hosted by the Methodist Church of Singapore. It took some planning to ensure that everyone was served at a similar time! Another highlight for delegates was being able to spend time in small groups in the *pondoks*, or homes of local people. This enabled the sharing of a range of experiences.

There were also more formal sessions at the conference, where the various committees and groups reported and presented items of interest. One area of special interest for Uniting Church representatives was the ecumenical focus during the gatherings. In one plenary session, Professor Norman Young (UCA member, Theological Hall in Melbourne) gave an insightful address with some timely ecumenically-related comments on a world basis.

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- (a) February 16-July 3
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*Professor Roberta Bondi (USA) joins the Methodist Church's only practising ordained woman in Singapore, the Rev. Lorna Khoo.*

Professor Geoffrey Wainwright (UK) reported on ecumenical developments at the World Methodist Council (WMC) level, including the 25th year of Roman Catholic/WMC conversations and the release of the report *The Apostolic Tradition*.

It was noted that the goal of full communion in faith, mission and sacramental life was feasible, though still a considerable time in the future. He also presented the hope for dialogue in the future with Orthodox and Anglican communions.

The preacher at the conference ecumenical service was the well-known Australian Greek Orthodox priest, the Rev. Dr John Chrysavgis (representing the Ecumenical Patriarchate).

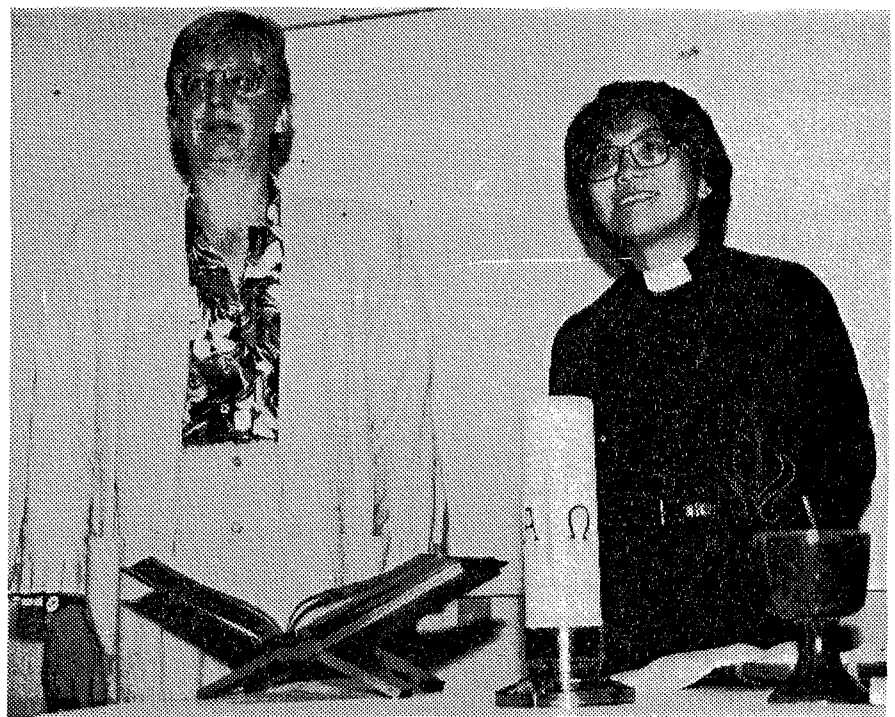
During the course of the conference, the new World Methodist Council held its first and only meeting for the term of office 1991–1996. The resolutions were fairly unremarkable, mostly concerned with matters of procedure (which is in dire need of an overhaul!), social issues and matters referred.

#### • *Delicate debates*

ONE issue which did raise a head of steam, however, related to the actions of the Singaporean government, specifically its expulsion of the Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) office from Singapore in 1987 and the recent introduction of the "Religious Harmony Bill", which is designed to prevent the involvement of religious leaders and groups in political affairs.

This was delicate issue, given that our hosts were the 22,000 members of the Singapore Methodist Church who form the largest Protestant denomination in the country (where the total number of Christians amounts to between 13 and 18 percent of the population).

But in fact, the above-mentioned actions of the Singaporean government had caused a good number of Meth-



odists, and people in the UCA, to question the holding of the conference and council at Singapore.

After much debate in the Council's executive, certain reasonably strongly-worded resolutions were passed and were due to be presented to the full Council. However, due it seems to the premature release of the executive decisions by the official Methodist Press Office, any opportunity for these to be passed at the Council level was lost. *The Straits Times* report on the executive decisions so embarrassed the Singapore Methodist Church that their representatives voiced even stronger objections to the proposed executive Council resolutions which expressed objections about the actions of the Singapore government over the CCA expulsion.

In the consequent Council meeting, procedural chaos was still the only winner, and ultimately after some heated and emotional speeches, confused accusations and careful negotiation, a "modified" resolution was passed by the Council, directing WMC officers to "stay in contact with the leadership of the Methodist Church in Singapore, member churches of the WMC in Asia, and the Christian Conference of Asia, concerning the expulsion of CCA, and

also with the Methodist Church of Singapore regarding the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act. Further, that the officers and the Executive Committee be prepared to work with the leadership of the Methodist Church in Singapore to do all that it can to promote religious liberty."

For the next five years, the Uniting Church in Australia will be represented on the new Executive of the Council (which meets at occasional intervals) by its three appointed delegates, Ms Hilary Christie-Johnston (Victoria), Rev. Vijay Paul (WA) and the new President of the Uniting Church, Rev. Dr D'Arcy Wood (ACT) and also through Mrs Betty Davis (NSW), who was appointed as the Vice-Chairperson of the Executive (the new Chairperson is Rev. Dr Donald English from England) and Rev. Dr Jim Udy (NSW), who was re-elected President of the World Methodist Historical Society and is now enthusiastically embarking on a proposal to hold a meeting of Methodist historians and Benedictines in 1994 to look at the theme of "holiness" in their traditions.

John Wesley might have been surprised and delighted to discover directions such as these taking place in the movement he founded ■