

‘A Conflict of Ideologies: New Zealand Baptist Public Discourse on the Vietnam War.’

ABSTRACT

In the 1960s and 70s New Zealand society was undergoing major social changes. Long-held beliefs on almost all fronts were being challenged. A new New Zealand was being birthed. In the midst of this period, New Zealand went to war in Vietnam. The Vietnam War divided the nation. Behind these opposing beliefs lay much deeper ideologies about how the world is viewed and the future of New Zealand society. This essay explores the New Zealand Baptist public response to the war and argues that their response was trivial and vague because of a fear that a stronger statement would have divided the denomination along broader ideological lines.

In 1970, a frustrated *New Zealand Baptist* correspondent wrote a letter to the editor complaining that although there were many significant social issues that the secular press were addressing at that time, the only recommendation from the Baptist Assembly that year was to condemn the explicit material in a University capping magazine. ‘How pathetic! How irrelevant! While we and our allies were napalming Vietnamese women and children, New Zealand Baptists were concerned with an annual student publication.’¹ This letter articulates the dichotomy that existed among New Zealand Baptists between concerns of personal morality and those of systemic morality. Whilst Baptists could be generally assured of denominational unity on issues of personal morality, such harmony collapsed when it came to volatile issues of systemic morality such as the Vietnam War. Behind the debate about the morality of the Vietnam War lay strong and differing ideological views on justice, politics, the direction of New Zealand society and the very meaning of the gospel itself. Behind the Vietnam War lay a war of ideologies.

This essay explores the New Zealand Baptist public discourse in response to the New Zealand involvement in the Vietnam War (1965-72). It situates the Baptist response within the changing New Zealand society of the 1960s and 1970s. The public discourse in this essay is split

¹ *The New Zealand Baptist*, [hereafter: *NZ*] July 1970, 7.

into 'official' public discourse and 'unofficial' public discourse. The official discourse will focus on the New Zealand Baptist Public Questions Committee's (PQC) response to the issue of the Vietnam War and especially on a 1967 resolution, which was the only resolution that was passed on the issue at a Baptist Assembly. Unofficial public discourse is found in the debates and issues raised within the pages of the denominational newspaper *The New Zealand Baptist*. Throughout the essay comparisons will be drawn between the Baptist response and the New Zealand Methodist Church response. It is important to note however, that this essay only researches the Methodist Church for comparative purposes and does not attempt to draw significant conclusions regarding the Methodist position.

New Zealand Society at the time of the Vietnam War

Michael King notes that '[i]f the 1940s and 1950s could be regarded as hinged moulds of conformity for most New Zealanders, then the 1960s were to see those moulds smashed.'² Keith Holyoake's National party slogan of 'Steady Does It' in 1963 summed up the government's view of their role as 'conservator of the *status quo*'.³ However, during the period of the Vietnam War (1965-1972) Holyoake's slogan 'steady does it' neither accurately described nor suited the immense changes that New Zealand society was undergoing.

James Belich notes the variety of influences that shaped the changes of this period. There were those 'coming in' from the outside such as television, air travel, the contraceptive pill, drugs and louder popular music, whilst at the same time there were those influences of difference and diversity that were 'coming out'. Issues such as women's liberation; youth culture; homosexuality; sexual awareness; the extension of hotel drinking hours and a resurgence of the Maori people and Maori issues. All of these challenged the assumptions of the 'tight society'.⁴ It was like a tsunami of change had hit New Zealand shores. Some of the changes appeared as great waves that crashed upon the shores of New Zealand society, whilst others appeared much smaller. However, all of

² Michael King, *After the War: New Zealand Since 1945* (Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton, 1988), 91.

³ Michael King, *The Penguin History of New Zealand* (Auckland: Penguin Books, 2003), 451.

⁴ James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000* (Auckland: The Penguin Press, 2001), 463-65. See also Laurie Guy, *Worlds in Collision: The Gay Debate in New Zealand, 1960-1986* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 2002), 48-63.

them contributed to a great surge of change that reshaped New Zealand society. King writes that '[it] was as if New Zealand, after two decades of somnolence, was suddenly advancing on dozens of fronts simultaneously'.⁵ New Zealand society was like a pregnant woman who was beginning to groan with labour pains as it awaited the delivery of a new society. Many, in this birthing process, acted as excited midwives keen to help with the birth of this new society, whilst others acted as disappointed grandparents awaiting the birth of an illegitimate child.

The churches were not immune to the changes that New Zealand society was undergoing. Laurie Guy, in his study on the Homosexual Law Reform Bill, argues that there were also major shifts taking place in the mainline churches in the 1960s. 'There was a much greater liberal-conservative ecclesiastical divide, leading to a 'collapse of the theological middle'.⁶ Indicative of this was the refusal of the National Council of Churches' to endorse a second Billy Graham crusade only ten years after endorsing his first New Zealand crusade. Guy rightly argues, 'Billy Graham had not greatly changed, but much church thinking had'.⁷

Paul Reynolds suggests that, during this period, Presbyterians and Methodists had a liberal theology that meshed with conservative political views. However, with Baptists, a conservative theology meshed with a conservative political view.⁸ Baptists would therefore appear to sit more comfortably in the camp of disappointed grandparents than excited midwives to the new society. Whilst Baptists tended to be a conservative denomination, they too had some who were more open to the encroachments of the new society. A letter to the editor in 1970 would seem to fit all stereotypes of Baptist conservatism. A correspondent wrote, 'I turned my T.V. on this afternoon for a little relaxation, only to find a Roman Catholic priest parading across the screen; and naturally I, being a Baptist, blotted him out'.⁹ However, another Baptist responded by rebuking the author. 'By presenting such a one-eyed view as this, you...provide the not inconsiderable number of critics of Baptist narrow mindedness yet further rope with which to hang us'.¹⁰ Similarly, the coming of the mini skirt brought one disgusted correspondent to write

⁵ King, *After the War*, 91.

⁶ Guy, *Worlds in Collision*, 62.

⁷ Guy, *Worlds in Collision*, 61-65.

⁸ Paul Reynolds, 'Religion and Politics in Auckland: A Study of the Socio-Economic Composition, Voting and Religious and Political Attitudes of Activists in a Sample of Auckland Nonconformist Churches' (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Auckland, 1970), 51-52.

⁹ NZB, January 1970, 5.

¹⁰ NZB, March 1970, 5.

‘[a]ll this bare expanse of upper leg makes me want to either vomit or burst out crying.’¹¹ Another Baptist mourned such views. ‘When, Oh WHEN are some of us poor dear Victorian-minded Baptists going to come out of our shells and become part of the present-day world?’¹²

Many of the beliefs of the ‘tight society’ were now under threat. This was especially true when it came to the role of women in church and society. One female correspondent was frustrated at the lack of volunteers in churches. She argued that many women are getting jobs and that this had repercussions on the number of volunteers in the church. She asked that women, instead of getting jobs, think seriously about taking an active voluntary role in the church.¹³ A minister’s wife agreed and stated ‘A minister’s wife has too many opportunities for service at home...to be away all day working...We are to be help-mates to our husbands in their service to God. Let us get our priorities right.’¹⁴ Other women clearly rejected these views of the role of women. One female correspondent fought for greater female representation of women on the Union Council. ‘[U]nless women are voted on to that male stronghold, I feel Baptists must concede that what they really believe in is the priesthood of all male believers.’¹⁵ The beliefs of the ‘tight society’ were under threat. A Baptist female correspondent argued for the right of women to the freedom of choice when came to abortion. ‘If we want a better community, with wanted people in it, then a pregnant woman must be allowed the choice as to whether she will take on the huge task of giving birth and coping thereafter effectively or whether she will terminate the pregnancy before it is too late.’¹⁶ At the 1969 meeting of the Canterbury-Westland Association it was inevitably noted that the churches were not doing as well statistically as they could be. In the debate as to why, a reporter noted that ‘some fresh air was blown into a rather static discussion by Mr Pollock, a student, who let fly on why he thought churches were making little appeal to so many young people. He felt young people (especially students?) are deeply concerned about the vast problems facing mankind today and cannot be bothered with churches which seem introverted and pre-occupied with petty affairs.’¹⁷ The surge of change was impacting Baptists as much as anyone else.

¹¹ NZB, January 1971, 20.

¹² NZB, February 1971, 20.

¹³ NZB, March 1970, 5.

¹⁴ NZB, July 1970, 7.

¹⁵ NZB, March 1969, 11.

¹⁶ NZB, October 1970, 4.

¹⁷ NZB, August 1969, 4.

Baptists were divided over whether the church's responsibility was simply to save souls or whether the gospel included social responsibility. Some argued that '[o]ur main task is to preach the Gospel, and involvement in controversial social issues only serves to obscure our mission,'¹⁸ and others 'that in proclaiming Jesus Christ, public questions are irrelevant and so not included in the Word of God.'¹⁹ To other Baptists, such reductionist views were ultimately a denial of the gospel. The editor of the *New Zealand Baptist*, Rev H. Whitten, noted with sadness the lack of people volunteering for the Public Questions Committee compared to the number volunteering for the Evangelistic Committee. 'As a people we are too prone to regard our mission... much in terms of soul saving, and too little in terms of social responsibility.' Whitten argued that such an emphasis represents 'a dangerous imbalance' and leads to the church becoming 'more and more irrelevant and ineffective in the present day world.' Touching on a key argument of this essay Whitten stated that when it comes to social issues, 'we seldom have anything to say – or, if we do, we say it so tentatively and so differently, that it becomes quite ineffective.'²⁰ The perceived Baptist apathy to social issues caused a correspondent to comment that 'the only morality that concerns Baptists is sexual morality. Apart from sexual ethics, we as a Denomination offer no other standards or values to our society.'²¹ Baptists were divided between, those who emphasised personal morality and those who stressed the social implications of the gospel.

New Zealand intervention in Vietnam and the public response

On 27th May 1965, the New Zealand Government announced that it would be sending troops to Vietnam in a combatant role. David McCraw argues that New Zealand's commitment to Vietnam was based on two key principles: 1). New Zealand was too small to defend itself and therefore relied on larger allies, especially America and Australia, for its security and it was important therefore to maintain these relationships. 2). The acceptance of the 'domino theory' which believed that if left unchecked, Communism would spread throughout the world and into New Zealand.²² This led to the Government's policy of 'forward

¹⁸ NZB, January 1971, 20.

¹⁹ NZB, February 1971, 20.

²⁰ NZB, August 1970, 1.

²¹ NZB, July 1970, 7.

²² David McCraw, 'Reluctant Ally: New Zealand's Entry into the Vietnam War' *The New Zealand Journal of History* 15 (1981): 49.

defence' – a defence strategy aimed at halting the spread of Communism and keeping it from New Zealand shores. It is important to note that this was the first time New Zealand was pursuing a war where the Government and the Opposition disagreed with each other over its merits.²³ It was also the first time New Zealand had entered into combat without Britain, revealing the way that New Zealand was forging new political and economic relationships. Such a move showed how the new New Zealand society was trying to move out from under the arm of the Mother Country and assert its independence.²⁴ These alliances through ANZUS and SEATO placed pressure on the New Zealand Government to commit combat troops in what American President Lyndon Johnson hoped to be a strong 'show of flags' in Vietnam as a sign of international political support.²⁵ However, the New Zealand commitment to Vietnam (3890 military personnel in total and no more than 543 at any one time)²⁶ was always minimal and ultimately token.

The issue of the Vietnam War divided households, communities and the nation. Within days of the announcement to send combat troops to Vietnam the Prime Minister's suite in parliament was invaded by protesters and thus begun a long anti-war campaign of protest.²⁷ Those who were hard line anti-communists felt that the commitment was token and should be increased, whilst anti-war protesters denied the 'domino theory' and argued that it was a civil war to which New Zealand should only supply humanitarian aid.²⁸ Opposition to the war was dramatically shaped by the influence of television which brought shocking and immediate images of the war and also revealed the scale of international and especially American protest.²⁹ An article in the *New Zealand Methodist Times* speaks of how the vivid images glued people to their seats and they 'felt' the war.³⁰

²³ Jack Elder, 'The New Zealand Labour Party and the Vietnam War: Traditions and Policy until 1973' (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Auckland, 1973), 254-64.

²⁴ King, *History of New Zealand*, 453.

²⁵ Roberto Rabel, 'Vietnam and the Collapse of the Foreign Policy Consensus' in Malcolm McKinnon (ed) *New Zealand in World Affairs Volume II 1957-1972* (Wellington: New Zealand Institute of Internal Affairs, 1991): 45.

²⁶ Deborah Challinor, *Grey Ghosts: New Zealand Vietnam Vets Talk about their War* (Auckland: Hodder Moa Beckett Publishers, 1998), 37.

²⁷ King, *After the War*, 116.

²⁸ King, *History of New Zealand*, 453-54.

²⁹ Claire Loftus Nelson, *Long Time Passing: New Zealand Memories of the Vietnam War* (Wellington: National Radio, 1990), 39. See also Rabel, 'Vietnam', 57.

³⁰ *New Zealand Methodist Times*, 18 August 1966, 3 (hereafter NZM).

Claire Loftus Nelson remarks that the protest movement brought together a diverse group of people ranging from militaristic radical youths through to Christian pacifists in an uneasy alliance.³¹ Roberto Rabel notes that '[the] extent of this support [for the anti-war movement] was illustrated during the nationwide mobilisations of the early 1970s and was especially evident amongst younger people in higher education: the so-called Vietnam Generation.' He goes on to argue that a significant lasting effect of the anti-war movement was that thousands of New Zealanders viewed their country's place in the world differently from the way the Government viewed it.³² The birthing of the new New Zealand, where the country asserted its independence as a nation, had begun to express itself in these political and ideological differences. Behind the public reaction to the Vietnam War lay a conflict of ideologies about the nature of New Zealand society.

Official Baptist public discourse on the Vietnam war:

After the announcement that the New Zealand Government were sending combat troops to Vietnam, the New Zealand Baptist PQC reported that it was preparing a statement for the Union Council Meeting in June.³³ The then editor of the *New Zealand Baptist*, Rev. N. R. Wood, wrote a report following the proceedings of the Union Council. He lamented the fact that the PQC resolution failed to pass the Council, which felt unable to make a statement at this juncture, and suggested it raised far-reaching questions. 'Is this a sign of a malaise near the heart of the Union? Has the Baptist Union lost its social conscience?'³⁴ The Wellington Baptist Association passed their own motion that year on the issue of Vietnam, appealing for all Christians to work for peace on earth, protesting against open warfare and the situations that give rise to war, recommending New Zealand increase its aid to South East Asia,

³¹ Nelson, *Long Time Passing*, 43. See also P. R. H. Jackman, 'The Auckland Opposition to New Zealand's Involvement in the Vietnam War 1965-1972: An Example of the Achievements and Limitations of Ideology' (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Auckland, 1979). Jackman notes the eventual split in the anti-war movement due to differing views on whether protests should be violent or non-violent.

³² Rabel, 'Vietnam', 58.

³³ NZB, July 1965, 174.

³⁴ NZB, August 1965, 202.

commending the Government for their concern in the area of aid and technical assistance and asked that they take every step to end the war.³⁵

In 1966, the PQC declared that if any statement was to be made in regard to Vietnam that it must be the committee to do so.³⁶ However, there was no mention of Vietnam at the 1966 Assembly and no resolution was passed. Following this there was a growing discontent among some Baptists and an increased demand for some form of statement from the PQC and the Baptist denomination as a whole. In July 1967 the Public Questions Committee received a copy of correspondence from *The Nelson Press* concerning Baptist attitudes to the war in Vietnam from Rev. F. Duncan.³⁷ In November 1967, the Ranui Baptist Church wrote a letter to the PQC urging them to present a resolution to Assembly regarding Vietnam (its minister, Rev I. S. Macdonald had already written into the *New Zealand Baptist* in August³⁸ expressing his shock that the 1966 Assembly had mentioned nothing about Vietnam). These were important influences in provoking the PQC to resolve that draft resolutions on the issue of Vietnam be prepared for their next meeting.³⁹ This became the only resolution that New Zealand Baptists passed on this issue. Because this is the central resolution regarding the response of the Vietnam War, and due to the circumstances surrounding its drafting, it is important to explore it and its passing at the 1967 Assembly in some depth.

The initial wording of the PQC draft resolution, presented by Rev A. L. Silcock, specifically expressed 'its support of the N.Z. Government and the Secretary-General of the United Nations, and other Christian communions, in their efforts to end the conflict and urges that these efforts be continued.'⁴⁰ This original draft was influenced by the Baptist resolutions from both Great Britain and Victoria, which both expressed their misgivings and distress about the war and aligned themselves with public figures and organisations that opposed the war. The PQC debate of the initial resolution is not accounted in the minutes. But, in the next meeting of the PQC a second draft of the resolution was made which had two vital amendments. The PQC withdrew its support of the New Zealand Government's attempts to create peace and it added in a clear

³⁵ Assembly Minutes 1965, Session VI, New Zealand Baptist Archive (NZBA), File A45 Book B1/125: 3.

³⁶ Minutes of the Public Questions Committee 3 November 1966, NZBA, File A/N 1552, Vivienne Boyd's Correspondence.

³⁷ Minutes of the Public Questions Committee 18 July 1967.

³⁸ NZB, August 1967, 12.

³⁹ Minutes of Public Questions Committee, 19 September 1967.

⁴⁰ Minutes of the Public Questions Committee 10 October 1967.

call for the Government to take the initiative in moving toward peaceful negotiations (see appendix). The minutes note that there were alterations made to the wording of the prepared resolution. The words 'N.Z. Government and' were deleted from the second sentence. At the same time the second paragraph was amended from having no mention of the New Zealand Government to now having a significant sentence inserted. It added in '[In] particular the Assembly urges the N.Z. Government to take the initiative by calling on both sides of the conflict to demonstrate their desire for peace by indicating by word and deed their readiness to move toward negotiations.'⁴¹ The accumulated effect of these two changes forms a censure by the PQC of the Government's attempts to create peace and hints at an opposition to the Government's position on the war itself. These changes are highly significant and contributed to the final draft becoming very contentious at the 1967 Assembly.

The resolution passed at the 1967 Assembly by 128 votes for and 90 votes against, showing its contentious nature and the denominational disagreement over it. When Rev Silcock presented the resolution he revealed the leanings of the PQC towards opposing the war. In putting forth the motion, he noted that '[in] the minds of many it is now more a moral issue than a military one.'⁴² He also correctly noted that whilst most people agree that this war must cease, '[it] is when we begin to talk of how we are going to stop it that we fall into strong differences of opinion...The resolution therefore avoids any attempt to fix blame or indicate methods.'⁴³ The PQC felt that the need to avoid denominational conflict came before the need to make a clear concise statement either in opposition or support of the Government and its policies. However, the debate that developed at the Assembly led to newspaper headlines reading 'Baptist Division on Vietnam War', with another noting that there was 'a sharp division of opinion' on the question of Vietnam.⁴⁴ Behind the differing stances New Zealand Baptists had on the Government's military intervention in Vietnam, stood differing worldviews. Rev I. S. MacDonald, who had already written a letter to the editor of *The New Zealand Baptist* in August 1967 expressing some people's shock at the fact that nothing was said on Vietnam in the 1966 Assembly, said 'Baptists hitherto had been silent on this issue, and this was to their shame...Our participation in Vietnam might have been politically expedient but it was morally wrong.' In contrast, Mr N.

⁴¹ Minutes of the Public Questions Committee 26 October 1967.

⁴² NZB, January 1968, 12.

⁴³ NZB, January 1968, 13.

⁴⁴ Various unreferenced newspaper clippings cited in NZBA File B1/58 Box 0022.

Sorenson and the Rev L. S. Armstrong expressed their unhappiness at the implied condemnation of the attitudes of the Government and proposed an amendment that assured the Government of their support. 'Mr Sorenson said that in Vietnam we are fighting an anti-god foe who aims at world conquest.' Clearly this only represented one extreme of Baptist opinion. Rev T. Cadman and Rev G. Smith protested that such an amendment was self-contradictory. 'Mr Smith said, 'When we support the Secretary-General of the United Nations *we are condemning the actions of our Government.*'⁴⁵ Both those who opposed the resolution and those who supported it viewed it as a censure of the Government.

Rev A. J. Gibbs asked the vital question of the PQC as to whether this was a motion of censure against the Government? In answering Rev Silcock, replied that the committee had been careful not to censure anybody. Publicly the PQC wanted to reassure the denomination that it was not censuring anyone. However, in light of the drafting and editing of the resolution at the PQC meetings, their public profession does not appear to represent fully the exact intent of the PQC. For the sake of denominational unity the PQC had to try to reassure people that they were not censuring the Government. Opinion on the war was divided into those who supported the Government and those who did not. However, as has been argued earlier and will be argued further later, behind debate about the Vietnam War was a much broader debate about worldviews and ideologies. If the PQC were to be seen as publicly censuring the Government they would have been seen to have a more liberal worldview than that of what Reynold's stated was a conservative denomination. If this were the perception of the denomination it would effectively pigeonhole the PQC as 'liberal' and cause even greater division. The PQC worked hard at making their censure of the Government more implicit than explicit in order to make the resolution more acceptable to the wider denomination and maintain denominational unity, but in the end the PQC's position on Vietnam, seen in light of the editing and drafting of the resolution, was further 'left of centre' than that of the conservative denomination.

Rev F. McKean insightfully summed up the feeling of some that 'the resolution, amended or otherwise, was just a 'paper tiger' which would be ignored by everybody because it was such a compromise motion and completely wishy-washy.'⁴⁶ The resolution attempted to censure the Government implicitly, in an attempt to please the polarised parties for the sake of denominational unity, but at the same time it

⁴⁵ NZB, January 1968, 13.

⁴⁶ NZB, January 1968, 13.

pleased no one. The result *was* a paper tiger that *was* completely wishy-washy and said nothing.

It is useful to contrast the Baptist resolution on Vietnam with the Baptist resolution on the proposed introduction of legislation to make blood, breath or urine tests compulsory for people arrested or suspected of drink driving. Both of these resolutions were passed at the 1967 Assembly and followed one another in the *The New Zealand Baptist* report on the Assembly. The Tests for Blood Alcohol Concentration was clear, specific and concise in its 'warm commendation' for the introduction of this legislation. Added to the 'warm commendation' the Assembly suggested that it would support legislation which made provision for degrees of seriousness, and they also gave 5 points of background information on drink driving and its effects on society.⁴⁷ When it came to the issue of drink-driving the PQC could be assured of the unanimous support of the denomination and could therefore speak clearly and specifically. The PQC could be assured that Baptists would be united over issues of personal morality (such as drink-driving) but such unity did not exist on issues of systemic morality (such as the Vietnam War). This allowed Baptists to speak out loudly and boldly against issues of personal morality but to whisper ambiguously about issues of systemic morality.

Following the 1967 resolution, the denomination did not officially address the issue of Vietnam again. There was a letter sent to the PQC from three members of the Thames Baptist Church, where Herbert Whitten, the editor of *The New Zealand Baptist* and strong opponent of the Vietnam War, was minister. The letter requested a detailed factual survey, covering twenty-four given headings, of the course of history in Vietnam over the last twenty-five years. The PQC decided that they could not deal with such a remit because 1). It asked for information that was simply not available. 2). It was worded in terms which already prejudged some of the issues involved. 3). It required a level of qualification which few N.Z. Baptists possessed to evaluate the evidence available, and anyone with that level of competence is unlikely to have time to produce yet another book on the subject.⁴⁸ At the same meeting the PQC were advised of the possibility of a delegation to the 1970 Assembly concerning the Vietnam War. The Secretary was advised to write to Rev H. Nees, the General Secretary of the New Zealand Baptist Union at the time, expressing their concern that both viewpoints should be included in any presentation to Assembly. The PQC judged

⁴⁷ NZB, January 1968, 13-14.

⁴⁸ Minutes of the Public Questions Committee 15 September 1970.

that the remit on Vietnam presented to the 1967 Assembly still represented the view of the PQC. The demands of the Thames Baptist Church were excessive and impracticable. However, in light of American invasions of Cambodia and Laos; the impact in New Zealand of the killings of student protestors at Kent State University by National Guardsmen; the violence between police and anti-war protestors in New Zealand during the visit of United States Vice President Spiro Agnew and the evolving discontent in the wider New Zealand public, it is questionable how well the 'paper tiger' resolution of 1967 represented the complexity of these issues. Perhaps it was better for denominational harmony for the PQC to avoid reopening the Vietnam War issue.

The New Zealand Methodist Church was much more specific, definitive and proactive in its stance than the Baptists were. It immediately took a stance of opposition to the Vietnam War. The Methodists released detailed resolutions every year and sent their President to Vietnam to be able to provide first hand information regarding the war.⁴⁹ By 1967, the same time as the Baptist resolution, the Methodist Church, whilst sending chaplains to serve in Vietnam, 'strongly protested' against the Government sending more troops to Vietnam.⁵⁰ By 1972, after the withdrawal of New Zealand troops, the Methodist President stated: 'The war in Indo-China, carried out with our connivance and support has become an obscenity and a nightmare, an offence against everything we stand for...Therefore, Conference calls on all Christians strenuously to oppose any future involvement of our country in any similar military adventure.'⁵¹ Whilst Baptists need not have held the same position as the Methodists, they could have learned much from their Methodist friends. The official Methodist response was far more concerned, involved and detailed than that of the Baptists. As will become clear in the next section, Methodists too were split denominationally over the issue of the Vietnam War but this did not deter them from making a clear stance, either way, on the war.

Unofficial Baptist public discourse

This section focuses on the discourse on the Vietnam War that came from the pages of the denominational magazine through editorials, articles and correspondence with the editor.

⁴⁹ Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Church of New Zealand 1970:155 (hereafter MOC).

⁵⁰ MOC 1967, 116.

⁵¹ MOC 1972, 167-68.

After the announcement of the New Zealand Government that it was sending combat troops to Vietnam, the then editor of *The New Zealand Baptist*, Rev N.R. Wood, wrote that the Vietnamese had the right to settle their own affairs and that armed intervention will only create such havoc that both sides will be pleased to come to the table.⁵² As noted earlier, Wood was frustrated at the failure of the 1965 PQC resolution to pass the Union Council. He questioned the Council's social conscience. 'What future is there for a Union of churches that is concerned with administration and evangelism but fails to relate these to the burning issues of the modern world?'⁵³ From the beginning important Baptist figures, especially those who did not support the war, felt that the issue of the Vietnam War would only highlight the denominational dichotomy that overemphasised evangelism and personal morality to the detriment of justice and systemic morality. Other key Baptist figures publicly opposed the war. Dr Bob Thompson and Dr Stan Edgar, lecturers at the Baptist Theological College, signed a statement in 1972 from the Christian Peace Movement that asked the Government to dissociate itself with the American policy of massive aerial bombardment on North Vietnam and to replace military aid with medical aid. Rev Angus MacLeod was, at this time, both the Baptist representative on the National Council of Churches (N.C.C.) and chairman of the Executive of the N.C.C., which opposed the war in Vietnam.⁵⁴

By December 1965, the Roslyn Baptist Church, whilst not wanting the denomination to condemn the war, were so concerned that the denomination had not protested against the inhumane practises that were being reported as common on both sides of the war, that they released their own resolution in *The New Zealand Baptist* forum deploring these practises and the fact that New Zealanders might be forced to take part in such actions.⁵⁵

In November 1966 there was a change in editorship of *The New Zealand Baptist* from Rev N. Wood to Rev H. Whitten. Whitten had served in WWII where he became a prisoner of war for four years. He had served five years as R.N.Z.A.F. chaplain and was the current minister of Thames Baptist Church. Whitten became a key figure of

⁵² NZB, July 1965, 168.

⁵³ NZB, August 1965, 202.

⁵⁴ National Council of Churches in New Zealand. *To Church People re Vietnam* (Wellington: National Council of Churches, 1967).

⁵⁵ NZB, December 1965, 308.

protest against the Vietnam War and with his military background his opinion carried significant weight.

The tone *The New Zealand Baptist* newspaper took was one of opposition to the war. It printed many statements from international bodies that condemned the war.⁵⁶ It published articles by key figures and bodies that spoke of the demoralisation of the Vietnamese people,⁵⁷ another article urging America to allow Asian nations to decide on whether America should pull out of the war,⁵⁸ and an article advocating that Vietnamese religious leaders should play a dominant role in bringing peace to Vietnam.⁵⁹ The explicitness of Whitten's statements against the war evolved in conjunction with public opinion. Initially, in 1967, he stated that the Vietnam War must be brought to an end as quickly as possible and that the only hope was negotiated peace. He called on Baptists to pray.⁶⁰ The article provoked no correspondence. Whitten's next editorial on the Vietnam War, in 1970, was more direct. Annoyed at the silence of the 1969 Assembly on Vietnam, Whitten called the war iniquitous and that every Christian voice should be raised against it.⁶¹ This article received one reply of support.⁶² Following the spilling over of the war in Laos and Cambodia, Whitten dedicated a full-page editorial to the war entitled 'This War must be Stopped.' In the article, Whitten, horrified at the suffering, degradation, brutality and death, called this war the greatest crime against humanity of this generation and that those supporting the war could not escape condemnation for it at the bar of history. Whitten proposed the withdrawal of American forces and their replacement by United Nations troops. Finally he noted the silence of the Baptists and solemnly said 'By our present silence about this war, we deny all the New Testament principles upon which we profess to stand.'⁶³

The replies to this editorial highlight the irreconcilable differences in worldviews that lay behind opinions on the Vietnam War. One Whitten supporter declared that people should not pray about it unless

⁵⁶ The World Council of Churches, *NZB*, May 1967, 16; The Southern Baptist Convention, *NZB*, November 1967, 7; The Christian Peace Movement, *NZB*, 1972, 12; The American Baptist Convention, *NZB*, August 1972, 11; and Baptists in U.S.S.R., *NZB*, September 1972, 13.

⁵⁷ *NZB*, January 1968, 27.

⁵⁸ *NZB*, February 1968, 13.

⁵⁹ *NZB*, August 1971, 15.

⁶⁰ *NZB*, April 1967, 2.

⁶¹ *NZB*, January 1970: 2.

⁶² *NZB*, February 1970, 4.

⁶³ *NZB*, June 1970, 1.

they are willing to do something about it like meet with local Members of Parliament or form discussion groups.⁶⁴ Three correspondents opposed Whitten's editorial. All three spoke of their fear and hatred of Communism. One wrote, 'Are we to choose God and democracy, or Communism and atheism?' Another agreed with the Government's domino theory. 'Given unhindered progress, the Communists would sweep through the East and on down to Australia and New Zealand.' An editor's note was added to this letter which showed the differing worldviews and ideologies that were at work behind this correspondence. Whitten replied 'We may add here also that we do not share our correspondent's opinion'.⁶⁵ An advocate of Whitten wrote of his detractors 'The sentiments expressed are indistinguishable from those outside the church. In fact they would look entirely in place in the pages of an R.S.A. publication or the Reader's Digest'.⁶⁶ Behind the Vietnam War lay a conflict of ideologies. Behind statements linking Communism with atheism and the democratic West with God lay ethnocentrism and privilege. With such views being foundational to people's belief systems, the Vietnam War exposed these beliefs and ultimately exposed the irreconcilable differences that lay between those who supported such views and those who opposed them. Whitten entitled his final editorial on the Vietnam War in this period 'When Will They ever Learn?' In counting the human cost of the war, Whitten asked 'who, with any compassion at all, can possibly believe that, in any way at all, this war has been worth it? ... Surely, of all wars, this has been the least justified, and the most futile, the most cruel and the most wicked'.⁶⁷

Like the soldiers and the rest of the New Zealand public, the Baptists had to choose to be involved in the Vietnam War. The official Baptist discourse chose to act as conservators of denominational harmony rather than speak out, either in support or opposition, and run the risk of polarising the denomination. In the vacuum that was created by the lack of a clear and concise denominational voice, Whitten was able to utilise his role as editor and his *mana* as an ex-military fighter and chaplain to act as prophet to the people and attempt to probe the Baptist denomination out of political apathy.

The sheer weight of Methodist engagement on this issue, in terms of resolutions, articles and correspondence, far exceeded that of the Baptists. The Methodist position was clearly against the sending of

⁶⁴ NZB, July 1970, 6.

⁶⁵ NZB, August 1970, 4.

⁶⁶ NZB, October 1970, 4.

⁶⁷ NZB, June 1972, 4.

combat troops to Vietnam and remained so throughout the war. The Methodist President responded immediately to the news of the commitment of combat troops to Vietnam by stating that the decision by the Government 'will be as deeply regretted as it has been strongly opposed by a large cross section of New Zealand Citizens.'⁶⁸ The war of ideologies was not limited to the Baptists. One correspondent opposed the President's statement citing that the Vietnam War was an ideological war between those who supported Communism and the subjection of the white people of the world and those who did not.⁶⁹ Another Methodist correspondent felt that the Conference decisions on the Vietnam War were wholly divorced from a majority of lay opinion.⁷⁰ This raises the question of whether leaders of both denominations were acting as priests of the *status quo* or prophets to the people. Along with opposing the war, Methodists sent padres to Vietnam. This placed the Methodist Church in the difficult situation of sending personnel to a war they condemned. At the same time, it also gave a breadth to their understanding of the war. Padre M. L. Dine wrote back to the church with a plea from the soldiers to remember that they were simply New Zealanders who were doing what the Government asked them to do and to pray for them.

The differing approaches of the Baptists and the Methodists to the Vietnam War are highlighted in two letters. One is to the *New Zealand Methodist* and the other to *The New Zealand Baptist* from people who felt that their worldview was not being fairly represented within their respective denominations. A Methodist correspondent, in light of the Methodist refusal to support Billy Graham, wrote how they had received debatable Vietnam addresses and exhortations about ethical responsibility, but in the last twenty years could remember only two occasions when they had been challenged to make a commitment then and there to Christ and his work.⁷¹ Comparatively, a Baptist correspondent, appalled by the complete indifference of the Baptists to the human suffering in Vietnam, wrote, '[As] a member of one of the larger Auckland churches, I can recall only one occasion when a public prayer was offered for Vietnam.'⁷² There were those among the Methodists who felt there was an overemphasis on justice and systemic morality to the detriment of evangelism and personal morality. Among the Baptists there were those who felt that there was an overemphasis on

⁶⁸ NZM, July 1965, 91.

⁶⁹ NZM, August 1965, 134.

⁷⁰ NZM, 8 December 1966, 2.

⁷¹ NZM, 27 March 1969, 2. cf. Guy, *Worlds in Collision*, 62.

⁷² NZB, February 1970, 4.

evangelism and personal morality to the detriment of justice and systemic morality.

Conclusion

The official Baptist public discourse on the Vietnam War was poor. It lacked clarity and did not provide a forum in which Baptists could express their views in search of discerning Christ's mind among them; an act that is central to a Baptist gathered theology.⁷³ When it was clear that a large dichotomy of beliefs existed, the issue was glossed over to maintain denominational unity. Official Baptist public discourse tried to present a middle road between the divisions out of a fear of splitting the denomination. This led them to produce a resolution, which had the intent of censuring the Government, but which said little. The implicit censure of the Government and the closeness of the vote points towards a PQC that tended to be further left of centre than its right-of-centre denomination. However, they could not allow this to become the impression the denomination had of the PQC; otherwise the resolution would have been rejected. In the vacuum left by the official Baptist resolutions and voices, Whitten used his position as editor of the denominational newspaper to provide unofficial public discourse which opposed the war and acted as prophet to the Baptist people to try and raise their consciences out of what he perceived as political apathy. Whitten provided a forum in which it was revealed that a deep dichotomy existed in Baptist views on the Vietnam War and ultimately much deeper ideological views of the world, the future of the nation and the meaning of the gospel. The unofficial Baptist public discourse revealed the irreconcilable differences that existed on both sides of the issue. At the same time, whilst greatly weighted in opposition to the war, Whitten allowed a forum for Baptists to engage in the issues surrounding the war rather than suppress these views for the sake of a false unity. Methodists too were split on this issue. The firm opposition to the war that the Methodist leadership took upset those among their denomination who supported the war but it at least allowed them to engage in the issue and avoid the paralysis of engagement that the Baptists suffered.

Baptists needed to engage more deeply in the issues surrounding the Vietnam War. In order to do so, they would have needed to

⁷³ Martin Sutherland, 'On Method: A Baptist *Tikanga*' in Martin Sutherland (ed), *Talking Theology: 2001-2002 Proceedings* (Auckland: R. J. Thompson Centre for Theological Studies, 2003), 120-129, 127.

recognise that behind the beliefs regarding the Vietnam War lay much broader ideologies, ideologies that differed on issues such as Communism, race, nationalism, the future of the nation and the very meaning of the gospel itself. Behind the Vietnam War lay a conflict of ideologies that Baptists preferred not to enter into. Whilst this preserved some form of denominational unity, it came at the expense of seeking Christ's mind on the Vietnam War and an opportunity to speak on behalf of God's people.

Andrew Picard
Napier Baptist Church, New Zealand

APPENDIX:

1967 New Zealand Baptist Resolution on the Vietnam War:

'That this Assembly of the Baptist Union of New Zealand affirms its growing distress at the continuance and escalation of the war in Vietnam. It expresses its support for the [New Zealand Government and]⁷⁴ Secretary-General of the United Nations, and Christian communions, in their efforts to end the conflict and urges that these efforts be continued.

That this Assembly appeals to **all** involved, in view of the increasing suffering in both North and South Vietnam, to make such concessions as may be necessary as a basis for a just settlement – [in particular this Assembly urges the New Zealand Government to take the initiative by calling upon both sides of the conflict **to demonstrate** their desire for peace by indicating by word and deed their readiness to move towards negotiations].⁷⁵

The Assembly also appeals to Churches and individual Christians to continue to pray for peace and to use every opportunity for expressing their concern.'

⁷⁴ This was included in the original draft of the PQC resolution but was deleted in an amendment.

⁷⁵ This section was not part of the original draft of the PQC resolution and was inserted in the amended form.