The missionary expansion of the Church of England paralleled the expansion of the British Empire. Where the explorers and soldiers and traders went, so too went the missionaries and it is to a collaboration between the Reverend Samuel Marsden, a representative of the Church Missionary Society, and Ruatara, a Bay of Islands Maori Chief, that we owe the foundation of the Church in New Zealand.

The first missionaries

The Reverend Samuel Marsden was chaplain to the New South Wales convict settlement. In 1809, while returning to Sydney after a visit to England, he nursed a fellow passenger, Ruatara, back to health.

In Sydney Ruatara became Marsden’s guest and friend. Impressed by the European farming technology he laid plans with Marsden to export that technology, along with the Gospel, to New Zealand.

Ruatara returned to New Zealand and Marsden persuaded the Church Missionary Society to send three Christian workers to New Zealand. They arrived, with Marsden on 22 December 1814 and held the first Christian service in New Zealand three days later, on Christmas Day.

Marsden returned to Australia leaving the three workers and their families in Ruatara’s care. It was Marsden’s belief that Christian conversion would follow such ‘civilization’ and it had been his recommendation that three ‘mechanics’ should be appointed to begin the mission.

The Church Missionary Society had therefore sent William Hall, a carpenter; John King, a shoe maker, flax dresser and twine spinner; and Thomas Kendall, a teacher.

The Mission was not an unqualified success. The first missionaries did not have the personal resources to cope with the pressures they faced. Quarrels broke out between them and, for a time, it looked as though the Mission was doomed to failure. It was saved by the arrival, in 1823, of the Reverend Henry Williams.

Henry Williams

Henry Williams was a naval officer before his ordination and his knowledge of the sea proved of immense value in his new work.

The Church Missionary Society sent him out with the injunction ‘to bring the noble but benighted race of New Zealanders into the enjoyment and light and freedom of the Gospel’ and with this commission he laboured until his death in 1867, never once returning to England.

Williams had an advantage over the first missionaries; he had been trained and prepared for his task. Soon after his arrival he was joined by his brother William and from their Mission Station at Paihia the two brothers conducted a strong and vigorous Christian Mission which spread its influence over much of the North Island of New Zealand.

By the time the first Bishop arrived in 1842 the mission was able to boast of 35 missionaries and more than 50 schools.

The first Bishop

The man chosen to be the first Bishop of New Zealand was George Augustus Selwyn. Just 32 years old, he was a gifted scholar and sportsman and a man of considerable energy.

Selwyn was one of New Zealand’s greatest pioneers. By the time he arrived in New Zealand he had already mastered the Maori language and his first years were spent travelling the length and breadth of his diocese. He also found time to lay the foundations for missionary work in the islands of the Pacific.

It was originally intended that Selwyn’s diocese should extend from the 50th degree South latitude to the 34th degree South latitude but, due to a blunder by a clerk in the Colonial Office, the letters of appointment read: ‘to the 34th degree North latitude’. Selwyn regarded the mistake as a challenge.

He bought a ship and became the pioneer Apostle to Melanesia. Later he appointed his friend, John Coleridge Patterson, as the first Bishop of Melanesia. When Patterson was martyred on the island of Nakapu in 1871, his death caught the imagination of the Church of
England and resulted in even greater missionary activity.

Perhaps Selwyn’s greatest gift to the New Zealand Church was his determination that it should be an autonomous and self-governing Church.

He drew up a Constitution which made the Church in New Zealand independent of the Church of England while retaining important links with the Mother Church; it created a decision-making structure which shared power between bishops, clergy and lay people; it created a governing body - the General Synod - to have overall responsibility for the affairs of the Church; and it laid down the rules and regulations for the orderly development of the Church through diocesan (or regional) synods.

Tikanga Maori

One of the most significant developments since Selwyn’s time has been the creation of an autonomous Maori Church within the Church of the Province.

From its beginning the Anglican Church in New Zealand was bilingual and bicultural. The first New Zealand Anglicans were Maori and the worship and business of the Church was conducted in the Maori language.

This unique character began to disappear only with the arrival of increasing numbers of English settlers bringing with them a nostalgia for their own traditions.

But the Maori character persisted. The first Maori clergymen was ordained in 1853 and he - and the many who followed him - continued to stamp the Maori character and influence upon the Church.

There were early calls for a Maori Bishop but these calls were not taken seriously until 1928 when the position of Bishop of Aotearoa was established and the first Bishop, Frederick Bennett, was consecrated.

Bishop Bennett’s power and influence was seriously limited. He was officially an Assistant Bishop to the Bishop of Waiaupu and he was appointed, not by the Maori people, but was elected by the Bishops of the North Island dioceses.

In 1976 the General Synod set up a commission to re-examine the position of the Bishop of Aotearoa and in 1978 a new and independent Bishopric of Aotearoa, with the Bishop working in equal partnership with other diocesan Bishops, was established.

Then, in 1984, the General Synod established a Bicultural Commission to study the implications of the Treaty of Waitangi for the Anglican Church in New Zealand. This led to the recognition that at least two cultures existed within the New Zealand Church and to the establishment of an autonomous Maori Church, living and working in partnership with the Pakeha Church.

This partnership has worked well and has even been proposed as a model for the future government of New Zealand.

The Anglican Communion

Our membership of the world-wide Anglican Communion is expressed in different ways.

The Anglican Communion recognises only one head, Jesus the Lord. But we do recognise the Archbishop of Canterbury as our senior bishop, the first among equals.

Every ten years he invites all other dioceses to send their bishops to a conference at Lambeth Palace; the Lambeth Conference. There the bishops meet on a level of absolute equality and, while they have no authority to make rules or laws for the Church, their reports and recommendations are taken very seriously.

In 1969 the Lambeth Conference established the Anglican Consultative Council. Once again, the Council has no legislative power. It is a forum for discussion. The Council meets every two or three years in different parts of the world and it maintains a permanent secretariat in London. Its terms of reference cover: sharing information; serving as a focus for common action; advising on Anglican relationships and structures; developing policies for world mission; stressing cooperation with other Churches.

This means the Anglican Church, unlike some other worldwide churches, has no central government. The effective unit of government is the diocese. This is as it was in the early Church where the bishop, surrounded by his clergy and advisors, was responsible for the management of his own ‘home territory’. Our unity is a freely chosen unity under Christ our Lord; a unity among equals.

Think about it

The word Anglican means the English Church, but in the past two centuries the tradition has been adopted around the world. Now 85 million members are part of national or regional Churches which collectively are known as the Anglican Communion.

Anglicans and Episcopalians the world over share aspects of their history, tradition and ways of worshipping. But no two churches are exactly alike even within a diocese, let alone a province or between countries. This unity in diversity is one of the things that make the Anglican Communion so special and such rich ground from which to change to world.

- from The Anglican Communion website

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