

Henry Williams
Missionary

July 16

When Henry and Marianne Williams arrived in the Bay of Islands in 1823, a new stage in the life of the Church Missionary Society mission in New Zealand was about to begin (Marianne is commemorated on 16 December). “Marsden Cove”, as they at first called Paihia, became the centre for the first real spread of the gospel.

Henry came as an ordained priest, with some training also in shipbuilding and medicine. Born in 1792, he entered the navy at the age of fourteen and served in the Napoleonic Wars. During the American War of 1812-14, his part in a duel between two ships, in which there was great loss of life, convinced him of the futility of fighting and prepared him for his future role as a peacemaker. Henry Williams appears to have begun considering missionary work as a result of the interest taken in him by his brother-in-law, Edward Marsh, who was a member of the CMS. However, it was not until 1819, after his marriage to Marianne in 1818, that Henry offered his services as a missionary to the CMS. He was initially accepted as a lay settler, but was ordained in 1822.

Until Williams’ arrival, the missionaries had followed Marsden’s policy of teaching useful skills as a preparation for evangelism, but with little success. Also, in order to obtain essential food, they had yielded to the pressure to trade in muskets, the item of barter in which Maori showed the greatest interest. Henry immediately became the acknowledged leader of the missionary team. Now their efforts came to be concentrated on the salvation of souls. The trade in muskets ceased. On the beach at Paihia in 1826, Henry oversaw the construction of the schooner “Herald”, which greatly assisted the obtaining of supplies. A missionary team made a concerted effort to master the Maori language, and the translation of the Scriptures and the Prayer Book was carried forward. Schools were established in the Bay of Islands, and every opportunity was taken to speak about the way of salvation.

When visiting a marae, Henry would be engaged in tending the sick, in preaching, and in conversations which would often continue far into the night. Except where he saw it as in conflict with the gospel, he accepted Maori custom. His courage and warm regard for people eventually won respect and affection. His offices as a peacemaker were first sought in 1828 during a dispute between Bay of Islands and Hokianga groups of Maori, which was peaceably resolved. While some later efforts were less successful, he was to gain a reputation for stepping fearlessly between armed and angry opponents and persuading them to a better way.

Following the baptism of the chief Taiwhanga in 1830, converts were attracted in increasing numbers. Throughout the next ten years the influence of the mission spread. Although the “Herald” had been wrecked, other ships were employed. Journeys of exploration by sea and on foot into the Thames district, the Waikato and the Bay of Plenty led to the establishment of a missionary team in a number of new stations. On a voyage to the East Coast in 1834, some local people who had attended the school at Paihia were returned home, where they eagerly shared their new learning (see Piripi Taumata-a-kura, 15 May). Released captives of the northern tribes were among those who on their own initiative began to take the message of Christ to a number of districts. Desire for the gospel was also assisted by intense interest in the new books. By 1840 tribes from the East Coast and the southern North Island were asking for a missionary to live among them and teach them. For the majority of these a missionary eventually became available. It was the vision and purpose of Henry Williams that persuaded the CMS to establish stations at Turanga, Wanganui, and Waikanae.

In this way the foundations of the Maori Anglican Church were laid. It was a remarkable pe-

riod of development and spiritual growth, in which “Te Wiremu” played a vital role, and which brought joy to his heart. His colleague Thomas Chapman records that on a walk in 1833 Williams remarked to him, “We have confidence in all around us - now we use our wings and enjoy flying.”

The arrival of colonists brought by the New Zealand Company heralded a stormy period in Henry Williams’ life. He strongly supported the Treaty of Waitangi, seeing the rule of British law as a protection against unscrupulous land deals and general lawlessness. With his son Edward he was responsible for the Maori translation. He and other missionaries travelled widely, interpreting the Treaty of Waitangi and seeking the signatures of chiefs away from the Bay of Islands. While Henry’s mana among the Maori persuaded many to accept the Treaty, the translation made by Henry and his son did not fully convey the import of the cession of sovereignty. Henry himself went to Port Nicholson, Queen Charlotte Sound, Waikanae, and Otaki. It was Henry Williams who advised the ailing Governor Hobson to establish the capital at Auckland.

Henry Williams’ concern over the alienation of Maori land and over the methods of the New Zealand Company had led him to purchase land in the centre of Wellington and in the Wanganui district and to hold it in trust for the Maori owners. In doing this he brought on himself the hostility of settlers. Finding Williams’ great mana among the tribes an obstacle, Governor Grey accused the missionary, first of treasonable dealings with the chief Kawiti during the northern war, and then of causing strife with the Maori by the wrongful acquisition of land for himself in the Bay of Islands. Both charges were without foundation and stoutly denied by Henry Williams. All the land had been purchased before 1840 as the only security he could offer his children, and with the full and continuing agreement of the Maori sellers.

Henry’s vigorous defence of himself against the attacks by the governor and his refusal to heed the advice of Bishop Selwyn that he should give up his lands led to his dismissal by the CMS in 1849, and he left the Paihia mission station. He was eventually re-instated by the Society five years later. In the meantime he moved to Pakaraka, to the lands in question, and continued to exercise his ministry in the church. He had been appointed archdeacon of Waimate in 1844, and remained so even after his dismissal by the CMS. When further trouble broke out between Maori and pakeha in the 1860s, Henry Williams took no part in the public debates raging up and down the country, though privately he was very critical of the government. His concern was for the Maori people of the north, to whom he continued to minister faithfully until his death on 16 July 1867. He was buried in the churchyard at Pakaraka.

Henry Williams’ family built a new church at Paihia as a memorial to him. It was dedicated on 17 November 1873. Soon after, as a tribute to him, the Maori people erected a stone cross in the churchyard. It was unveiled on 11 January 1876, and on it is the following inscription:

He
Whakamaharatanga
mo
Te Wiremu
He tohu aroha ki a ia na te
Hahi Maori
He tino matua ia ki nga iwi katoa
He tangata toa ki te hohou rongo i roto i nga riri Maori
E 44 nga tau i rui ai ia te Rongo Pai ki tenei motu
I tae mai ia i te tau 1823
I tangohia atu i te tau 1867

A
memorial
to
Henry Williams
A token of love to him from the
Maori Church
He was a father indeed to all the tribes
A courageous man who made peace in the Maori Wars
For 44 years he sowed the Good News in this island
He came in the year 1823
He was taken away in the year 1867

For Liturgical Use

Henry Williams was born in 1792 and served in the Royal Navy. From 1823 he became the leader of the CMS missionaries from his base at Paihia. He became renowned for his often successful mediation in inter-tribal fighting. As conversions increased Williams supervised the establishment of several new mission stations. He strongly supported the Treaty of Waitangi, and was official interpreter at the first signing. He was unfairly criticized by Governor Grey for his land purchases on behalf of his family, but served the Maori people for over forty years until his death in 1867.

Sentence

The dwellers at the ends of the earth are awed by your wonders, O God; you make the lands of sunrise and sunset resound with shouts of joy. *Psalm 65:8*

Collects

Everloving God,
you so enabled Henry Williams to proclaim the gospel
among the Maori people
that he is remembered as a father of the tribes;
fulfil among us his vision,
that through our labours
your church may be a true partnership of aroha;
through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

Jesus, prince of peace,
accept our praise and thanks
for Te Wiremu the peacemaker;
give us his discipline
and his respect for people
different from himself.

Psalms 57 136:1-9,25-26

Readings

Isaiah 56:3-8 I will gather yet others
2 Corinthians 1:12-14 Our boast

Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed are the peacemakers

Post Communion Sentence

You, O Lord, are healing the brokenhearted, and binding up their wounds.

Psalm 147:3